

THE TALES OF
Book III
MARIELLE CLARAC

The Temptation
of *Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo

Illustrator: Maro

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✿ Julianne Sorel

Marielle's best friend. An avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content.

✿ Aurelia Cavaignac

Daughter of Marquess Cavaignac. Has blonde hair, green eyes, and stunningly good looks.

✿ Emile Clarac

Marielle's father, Viscount Clarac. Appears to be friendly and cordial, but has a hard-nosed side to him as well.

✿ Lutin

An internationally notorious thief. He exclusively targets nobles and the wealthy, so the lower classes see him as a hero. Keenly interested in Marielle.

✿ Francis Louvier

Simeon's childhood friend. An agreeable young man working for a state-run trading company in the Kingdom of Gandia. Has temporarily returned home to Lagrange.

✿ Rose Bellecour

A beautiful and alluring woman who dresses in men's clothes. Francis's colleague in the trading company. An old acquaintance of Simeon's.

✿ Adrien Flaubert

24 years old. The middle son of House Flaubert. A naval officer assigned to Gandia. Has returned home for his brother's wedding.

✿ Noel Flaubert

15 years old. The youngest son of House Flaubert. Appears at first glance to have a sweet and angelic disposition.

✿ Olga

One of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. An intellectual type with brown hair.

✿ Isabelle

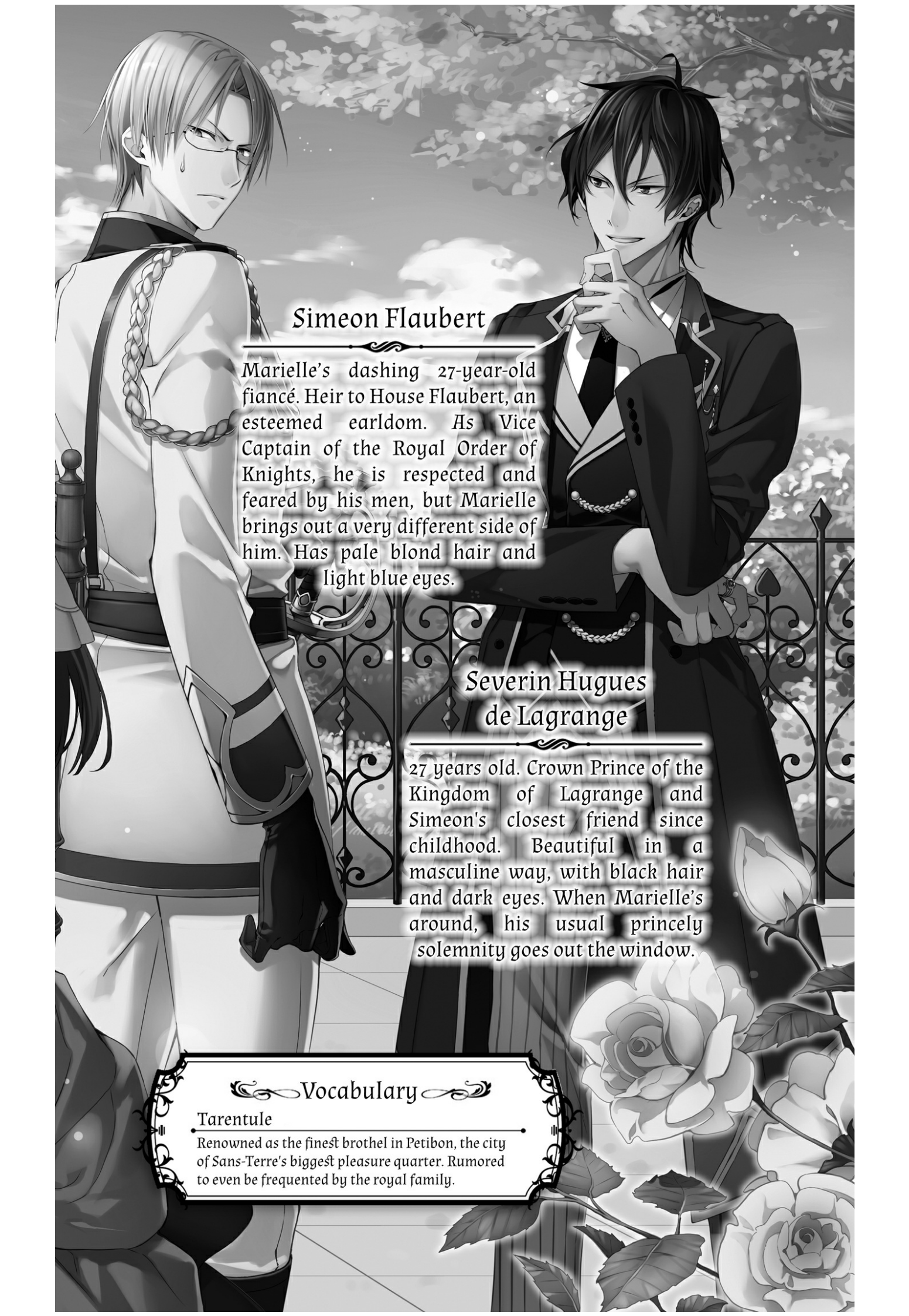
One of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. A glamorous lady with red hair.

✿ Chloe

One of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. A blonde who presents a cutesy image.

Marielle Clarac

18 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.



Simeon Flaubert

Marielle's dashing 27-year-old fiancé. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. As Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, he is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

27 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.

Vocabulary

Tarentule

Renowned as the finest brothel in Petibon, the city of Sans-Terre's biggest pleasure quarter. Rumored to even be frequented by the royal family.

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Chapter One

After Lord Simeon proposed to me last summer, my life changed quite drastically. I became the subject of curious stares wherever I went, and people who used to seem so stratospherically far above me that I couldn't even go near them became people I could talk to directly.

I have many memories of that time, but the one that's remained with me most of all is the first public gathering I attended together with Lord Simeon. It began with that key moment that all had been awaiting so eagerly: the appearance of his much-spoken-of fiancée. As soon as I appeared, all eyes were on me...and then all of them cocked their heads in confusion at once. "What? Really, her? His fiancée is a girl like that? This isn't some kind of joke at our expense?" Yes, it was a night that caused a great deal of befuddlement in the nobility of Lagrange.

At first it had been rather intense, but after we'd finished making the rounds and I'd introduced myself to all and sundry, the clamor calmed down somewhat, and I danced with Lord Simeon for the first time.

Even now, I clearly remember the way my heart raced in that moment. It truly was a wonderful night. We glided across the floor, whirling around and around. Paired with Lord Simeon's tall frame I felt slightly mismatched, but that was no impediment whatsoever, for you see, the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights was not only an expert in military arts, but in the art of dancing as well. He led me masterfully, gracefully, as we followed the music. He made me feel as though even I had become a proficient dancer.

"Lord Simeon, you're awfully good at this. I've never found it so easy to dance before."

"You're a good dancer as well. I'm sure you'd be able to keep up with a faster tempo than this."

"Oh, but then I'd be exhausted straight away. Going slowly is much more fun."

“Because you can watch the people around us?” The light blue eyes that looked at me from behind his glasses glinted with a faint hint of mockery.

At that point we still had not laid our hearts bare to one another, so I didn’t fully grasp the meaning of what he had said. I didn’t realize he was poking fun at my interest in secretly observing people and collecting my observations to use as reference material.

“I don’t have time for that,” I replied, which was partly a polite deflection and partly an honest response. Certainly, I *was* enjoying the reactions of those around me, but at that moment, Lord Simeon was simply too wonderful to pull my eyes away from.

It truly was unbelievable. This man was my fiancé, my escort to the ball, and my dance partner.

He was the heir to a prestigious earldom and a knight of the royal guard. He was the confidant of the crown prince, and his career trajectory made it all but assured that he would have an important ministerial role in the future. Furthermore, he was as dashing handsome as a storybook prince. Indeed, he set the heart of every young noblewoman racing. This beautiful man, far too good to be true, was my fiancé. Anyone would struggle to believe it. Even for a marriage of convenience, we were too mismatched a pairing. Our looks and our social ranks were too disparate. Our ages were also quite far apart. To say he was too good for me didn’t go far enough. For me, he was an unreachably high peak on a distant mountain.

But it went beyond that. Lord Simeon’s greatest charm of all was something very different indeed.

Though his gaze looked gentle and nonchalant, it hid a calculating shrewdness. Even though he was attending this ball in a personal capacity rather than a professional one, he did not let his guard down and continued keeping a close eye on everything and everyone. This was, no doubt, because the crown prince and the two princesses were present at the ball. He couldn’t simply leave their protection to his subordinates; he had to look out for threats. Despite his refined behavior and smile, his eyes still glowed with vigilance. *And I’m sure he saw the knights on guard duty who took some food from the table in*

the corner when they thought he wasn't looking. He'll probably punish them later. Oh, how thrilling!

I couldn't get enough of the Demon Vice Captain's penetrating gaze. He was a fearsome man who could see through any scheme—a black-hearted military officer who appears friendly on the surface but is plotting cruel things underneath. There, before my very eyes, was the apex of my fantasies, the exact thing that fuels my fangirl fire most of all. And I was dancing with him, hand in hand! Can you imagine the feeling? It was as though the archetype I yearn for most of all had leapt out of the pages and into my life!

It's such a joy, this viciousness beyond all measure. Three cheers for the black-hearted Vice Captain!

That night at the ball, I danced the steps as if in a dream, so spellbound that I was drowning in him. I could hardly believe I was really there, touching someone I'd only ever seen from a distance, exchanging words with him, getting so close. If someone had told me this was all a dream, I'd have fully believed them. How could my ideal man, so handsome and cruel, exist in real life? It was a mystery!

Those were my thoughts at the time, anyway. They've changed slightly since then. Admittedly, Lord Simeon does have that master tactician side to him, but he's actually very kind and earnest, which I didn't notice until some time afterwards. In the time we spent together just after we'd gotten engaged, when we were still hiding our true thoughts and feelings, I simply looked at him—and fangirled over him—as though he was a character in a story.

Many eyes focused on us as we danced. The hem of my dress whirled this way and that. Suddenly Lord Simeon changed direction, and a moment later I realized we had almost collided with another couple. When I looked, I saw to my surprise that it was the couple hosting the party, Duke and Duchess Silvestre.

Duke Silvestre, a younger cousin of His Majesty the King, had long black hair, while his wife's was a starkly contrasting silver. They were looking our way as well, and when our eyes met, Lord Simeon and I bowed slightly as we continued to dance.

The duke's vague smile made it impossible to read his emotion, but his wife was more forthcoming, smiling kindly while returning a nod of her own. We soon parted from them on the dance floor, but for a while I followed them with my eyes.



“Is something wrong?” asked Lord Simeon, returning me to my senses.

Somewhat regretting my slight impropriety, I apologized. “No, not at all. My apologies. Only, until now I’ve never had the chance to be in such close contact with people of their status.” I returned my gaze to Lord Simeon. “I feel almost afraid, as though it’s not permitted for someone in my position to draw so near to them.”

“No need to be cautious. It’s not in the duke’s nature to care so much about rank, and his wife is very much the same. They’re kind people on the whole. They’re not harsh or quick to judge.”

“I know. When I introduced myself to them earlier tonight, they didn’t make a single scathing remark. They simply replied normally. Even so, their rank is so far above my own, I feel nervous.”

Unlike Lord Simeon, my house was a mid-ranking viscountcy, which meant I wasn’t used to being in this position. But when I pointed this out to Lord Simeon, he smiled somewhat maliciously. *My word, that wicked smile is almost too much. There it is, exactly what I adore—that dark sense of roguishness! It’s just too wonderful... I’m starting to pant!*

“Are you sure it’s nerves that you feel?” he asked. “It’s not curiosity instead?”

Now I fully understand what he meant in saying that. Lord Simeon had already known for years that I spent my time observing other people in search of reference material and fangirling opportunities. The intense curiosity hidden behind my prim and proper facade was no secret to him at all. But at that point, not yet knowing that, I tried to deflect his comment with a vague and inoffensive reply.

“I do have some measure of curiosity, of course...but I still find myself slightly awestruck by them.”

“Which is somewhat unexpected. You weren’t so timid around Prince Severin or Duke Chalier.”

“I was still nervous, but His Highness and Duke Chalier are both such jolly people, which provided enough reassurance that I felt able to talk to them. Duke Silvestre has something of an enigmatic, unapproachable quality to him.”

“I see,” Lord Simeon replied.

In my time spent collecting gossip, a handful of rumors about Duke Silvestre had reached my ears here and there. Certainly, he was the type of man that Lord Simeon described, but I’d also heard a few surprising anecdotes that might have been fact or fiction, so I couldn’t help it if my curiosity was piqued now that I had finally gotten so close to the man himself. My interest was aroused, but I still felt uncomfortable getting any closer. That was about the long and short of it.

Compared to observing him secretly as I had done so far—from great distances, or from the shadows—the circumstances were different in a number of ways. I wasn’t present at this ball purely to observe, but also to accompany Lord Simeon, so I had to carefully consider how close I could get to each person and to what extent I could justify letting my guard down. This was another change brought about by my engagement to Lord Simeon. Though the ladies of society would envy and mock me for marrying into money and status regardless of how I acted, it still wouldn’t do for me to rush blithely ahead with no concern. That night was the first time I warned myself that I really had to try and adjust my mindset.

The only way I would be able to keep observing my perfect fiancé at such close range was if I did my best to maintain my image in polite society. At the time, I had many thoughts along the lines of: *For the sake of my continued fangirling, I will do my very best!* Though when I think back on it, I realize now that I had an excessive amount of tension in my shoulders.

Since that night, the seasons had turned as I watched the leaves fall and then the snow, and we had confessed our feelings for one another. We had revealed the secrets in our hearts, and what remained between us was nothing but love. Now I didn’t have to work so hard on my own anymore. I knew that Lord Simeon understood me, and that I could rely on him. I, in turn, wanted to be the one who understood and protected him more than anyone else could.

Now that color had returned to the world, people were beginning to gather and go out again. How many times had I danced with Lord Simeon by now? I was not sure, but the thrill had not diminished one bit, while the affection and unwavering sense of security had only increased. Tonight, too, I would look into

his light blue eyes and step in time, while the man I fangirled over the most, the man I was consumed by, once again melted me with his gentle smile.

There was not long to go until the day itself. Once the gardens were in full flower, and even the roses had begun to bloom, I would put on a pure white dress.

I am counting the days until I can be your bride.

Chapter Two

The snow had disappeared from the city streets, and with every passing day the breeze grew more pleasant. Now that it was possible to go outside without a thick coat, it was finally feeling like spring had come. Buds were sprouting forth on the trees, and small flowers had started to bloom in the earth.

Making it through the long winter and greeting the spring at last had enlivened everybody's hearts. There were still some days when a cold wind blew, but the ladies of society were determined not to let that hold them back, so vast numbers of them were seen out and about in light dresses. The fashion in winter had been for dresses that appeared plain at first glance but had hidden splendor, and so, almost in retaliation, the trend had now moved on to clothing that struck you with its brilliance the moment you laid eyes on it. Accordingly, the most popular hues this season were pale yet bright, while skirts were decorated at the back with pleats gathered together and endless layers of lace flowing down like a waterfall.

The city of Sans-Terre, capital of the Kingdom of Lagrange, was full of this grandeur—of flowers blooming a tad early. However, there was one young girl walking in the city who had firmly turned her back upon such things.

Her outdated dress had no doubt been maintained as carefully as she could manage, but one could see at a glance that it was rather old by now. Her strikingly ordinary brown hair also had no ornaments to decorate it, while her handbag was also quite shabby if one looked closely. She didn't remove her worn-out gloves, likely not due to the cold, but as an effort to hide her rough and unladylike hands. Though she had clearly tried her hardest to maintain a respectable image, it was evident that this young woman had fallen on hard times. People who saw her no doubt wondered if she had been forced into poverty after the death of her father, or some such.

I chuckled softly. "This is perfect, if I do say so myself. Dressed like this, I'm certain that even if I met someone I knew, they would never notice me...though

in any case, I am known for being difficult to spot once I've blended into a crowd." In thoroughly high spirits, I gazed at my reflection in the publishing company's window.

Just then, a boy carrying a pile of documents stopped nearby and smiled wryly. "That looks like hard work. Do you really have to change your appearance so substantially just to hide your social status when you leave the house?"

This young man, of about my own age and with delightfully cute features, spoke in a somewhat feminine manner. This was inevitable, as for seventeen years—almost his entire life thus far—he had lived his life as a woman. A strange series of events had led to my being acquainted with Lord Michel, but now at last he was living as a man, had broken all ties with his noble father, and had entered the working world. Even though he was sometimes pushed around or shouted at by his boss and his more experienced colleagues, he was a strong-willed person and did not let himself be discouraged. He appeared to be enjoying every day and living his life to the fullest.

As well as being a viscount's daughter, I had a secret identity as an author, so I was in town to visit the publisher of my novels. I had attended a meeting with my editor, but I was also glad to have a chance to see how Lord Michel was getting on. I was pleased to see him looking so cheerful. There was no hint of the loneliness that had been so visible on his face before.

"Well, that is part of it," I replied, "but there is an element of fun as well. It's something of a hobby for me."

"A hobby?"

"Yes! Recently I've become obsessed with disguises. I've been doing a lot of research into just how far it's possible to transform myself into a different person."

Lord Michel raised his eyebrows somewhat incredulously. "I really don't think you need to do that, Lady Marielle."

"Lord Michel, please don't call me that name here. I'm the mysterious author known only as Agnès Vivier."

“Oh, of course. I’m very sorry, Miss Vivier. You can also just call me Michel. A trainee doing mostly busywork doesn’t need a title of honor.”

After this short mock argument, we stopped and giggled at one another. Then a voice called to Lord Michel from inside. He replied and picked up the documents, which he’d momentarily set down.

As he turned back, he said, “You shouldn’t try so hard to compete with that mysterious thief, you know. You’re about to be married to a future earl. In any case, get home safely.”

He bowed and gracefully set off back to the editing room. Even now, he still carried himself like a lady. He was so refined, I felt as though I could learn a thing or two. I watched him go, then I left the building behind me and made my way along the road outside.

It’s not that I had been consciously thinking about Lutin, though he was a master of disguise as well. I merely wanted to improve my own disguise techniques, as a way to push my special ability of blending into the background to even greater heights. I’ll admit that it had been slightly vexing for me recently when he pointed out a flaw in one of my outfits, but it was an interesting subject to be absorbed in regardless of that. *If I can add mastery of disguises to my ability to hide in plain sight, I think I could become a first-rate intelligence operative!*

Of course, that would require someone to hire me. Ultimately, it was just a mixture of my fangirl mindset and what I *wished* I could do. I didn’t really think of it as an actual possibility. *I’ll just create a female spy character to play an active role in a novel.* My editor had been enthusiastic about that idea.

I took off my thick coat, and both my body and my heart felt light and free as I walked, enjoying the gentle rays of sun. The streets were now clear of the snow that had covered them a month ago, and the paving stones were left completely dry. The number of people around had also increased now that the weather was warmer. It felt like a waste to just go straight home, so I headed toward a street lined with shops.

The store I went into first was one specializing in goods for gentlemen. Lord Simeon had given me all sorts of gifts, so I decided it wouldn’t go amiss to give

him one too once in a while. But alas, as hard as I looked to find a suitable gift, nothing jumped out at me.

Dear oh dear, I really don't know what men like. Lord Simeon doesn't wear cologne, but perhaps cufflinks would be a safe choice, or a tiepin? Or maybe he'd appreciate a cane. But then, which kind? I prefer the down-to-earth variety without too many decorative elements, but I suppose those are aimed more at elderly men. The fashionable kind used by younger men are a little more ostentatious. Perhaps this ivory cane would suit Lord Simeon?

No, I decided, a sword suits him far better than a cane. In fact, what I felt suited him most of all was a riding crop—but I knew he'd be angry if I got him one of those as a present. *Besides, where do they even sell them?*

While I was busy quietly fangirling to myself, the shopkeeper came and spoke to me. “Are you looking for anything in particular?” His tone suggested that he meant less to help a customer in need and more to chase away a suspicious character. His expression was unabashedly mistrustful.

This was only to be expected given my current garb. If a lady who looked as poverty-stricken as I did entered his shop selling high-class goods for men, he would of course be wary that she was there only to window shop, or worse, to commit a theft.

Even if I were to ask him for help, it didn't seem like he would provide much of it, so I gave up on trying to buy anything at this store. “No, I was just looking. Please excuse me.”

I left the shop, hearing a deliberately audible “Hmph!” behind me. I was somewhat disappointed. *Maybe I should go home and change, then go out shopping again.* But I still wanted to go into at least one more shop first if I could.

I wandered aimlessly, looking at the various shops as I walked past. There was one that sold watches and glasses. I had a flash of inspiration. *Wasn't he saying he needed new glasses fairly soon? What if we had matching glasses?*

Lord Simeon and I both regularly wore glasses. He, of course, was more suited to glasses than anyone else. They were an important prop that conveyed a stern and intellectual image, and sometimes a cold and chilling one. *What if, I*

decided, *I had glasses made for him that emphasized his appeal as a black-hearted military officer, then had a matching pair made for me?* They wouldn't match in an obvious way that was clear at first sight, but in some of the hidden decorative elements that don't stand out so clearly. *Wouldn't that be satisfying?*

I began to get excited about my own brilliant idea. More so than excitement at finding a present for my fiancé, it was self-satisfaction. Still, I really wanted to bring this idea to life. Glasses have to be made to fit the wearer, so I decided I would ask Lord Simeon to accompany me to that shop sometime soon. Deciding that gave me a joyous feeling as I walked past.

Up to that point, it was a very fine day indeed.

However, just as I was experiencing the delight of deciding on my future shopping plans, a violent commotion broke through my peace and tranquility.

A shop not far ahead suddenly erupted with violent cries, and a large number of people came running out. Shocked, the surrounding passers-by stopped to look as a conflict broke out on the street.

For a moment I thought it was a robbery, but no, it appeared otherwise. One side involved in the conflict was a group of men wearing naval uniforms. The shop they had all come out of appeared to deal in rare imported goods. Through the window I could see a display of ornaments and handicrafts from the lands to the south.

It could be a crackdown on illegal immigrants, I considered.

The number of people being arrested was too great to believe they were all employees of the shop. They all appeared to be people of southern origin, and every one of them looked impoverished. There would forever be people entering illegally to seek work; it was a matter that all countries had to contend with. It seemed likely that this shop had been secretly providing assistance to illegal immigrants.

I'm sure those people are struggling and doing their best to get by, but if they're breaking the law, there's not much hope of any other outcome. I tried to walk past, keeping my distance from the commotion as best I could.

Still, the whole business seemed very rough. The sailors were mercilessly using force, even against people who were unarmed. They didn't draw swords, but a powerful blow from a baton would still cause injury. I saw people passed out and bleeding. A judgmental feeling stirred in me. *Couldn't you manage this without causing so much pain?*

I'd heard that of the various military branches, the navy was the most rough and violent. I was also far more used to the Royal Order of Knights, who demanded dignity of their members. No doubt this made me feel the difference especially keenly when I saw ordinary military men. The sight before me was frightening.

I half-ran in an effort to get away as soon as I could—but just then, a particularly loud scream rang out. I stopped and turned my head.

My eyes froze on a young boy. *There's a child here? One that young?*

He looked around ten years old. The shabbily dressed boy had slipped through the sailors' grasp and was running in my direction. The nearby onlookers stepped back with troubled faces, and a path opened up before him. No one wanted to catch him or prevent his escape. *I know these people are criminals*, I thought, *but I don't want to see violence used against a child*. Based on the crowd's behavior, I didn't seem to be the only one thinking that.

When the boy was right in front of me, the sailor giving chase finally caught him. With a cry of "You little brat!" he lifted his baton high in the air.

I leapt out in front of the boy and grabbed the man's arm. "Stop, please! He's a child!"

Remembering it now brings me out in a cold sweat, but in the moment, I had no time to think or hesitate. A child was about to be struck right before my eyes.

"Who the hell are you!? Are you working with him!?"

"No, I'm not, but you have to stop this senseless violence! Is this child so dangerous that you have no choice but to hit him? You can just take him in, you don't need to hurt him on purpose!"

"Shut up, woman! It's none of your business!"

He flung me off with one forceful motion and I collided with the paving stones. The onlookers stirred loudly. At that point I finally became aware of how far I'd overstepped the mark. When I'd tried to interfere, it was obvious that this would be the outcome.

Still, I couldn't have just watched that happen in silence.

As I fought back the pain of the blow and began to sit up, someone offered their support. A low voice, filled with sweetness, tickled my ear. "What a terrible brute, doing a thing like that to a lady."

When I looked up, startled at the strangely sensual feeling that his voice provoked, my vision was filled with a magnificent mane of blonde hair.

It was glossy, lustrous, and the color of deep, rich honey. It flowed down, whirling past his shoulders to his chest. It was just so beautiful. Even amongst women, there were few who had such gorgeous hair.

As I stared at him in admiration, the surprises did not end there. His face was stunningly beautiful as well. His honey-colored eyes and golden brown skin were an impressive sight to behold. It was a different variety of beauty than I had seen before in Lord Simeon and His Highness. It had a feminine tenderness, but a masculine charm, strangely melded together in a way that did not seem contradictory at all. His slightly drooping eyes and full lips radiated an indescribably sweet sensuality.

For a moment I forgot about the current situation and just stared, rapt. From his hair to his skin color and beyond, this was a person who made a distinct impression. I'd seen all kinds of beautiful people in my life thus far, but this man was still quite exceptional. One glance, and I knew I would never forget him.

"Are you all right?" he continued in a kind voice. "You're not injured at all?"

He helped me up, and I thanked him as I stood. Then I noticed that the sailor who'd flung me to the ground was looking in our direction. I immediately knew why. It was the color of the man's skin. He was clearly of southern origin as well, which placed him under suspicion.

"I'm fine," I said to the man in a quiet, halting voice, "so perhaps you'd also be safer leaving, so you don't get mixed up in all this."

In response, he snorted dismissively. He turned to face the sailor with an ironic smile. “No need to worry about me. Arresting the people who ran out of that shop is one thing, but I don’t think even this fine gentleman is misguided enough that he’d start arresting random passers-by.”

Though addressed to me, these words were meant to be overheard. The sailor’s cheek began to twitch. This could definitely be seen as picking a fight. I broke out in a cold sweat.

“Obviously, I do have southern blood in me,” he continued. “But this is not a country village deep in the mountains; it’s Sans-Terre, this country’s capital city. There’s surely no one here with so little knowledge of the wider world that they’d treat everything outside of the norm as something strange and unusual.”

The sailor’s mustache began to twitch along with his cheek. I was on tenterhooks, fearing he might suddenly charge toward us with the baton, which he still held in the air.

But the sailor appeared to know he was defeated. After all, the man beside me was very well-dressed, and everything about him made it clear he was from the upper echelons of society. At this provocation, the sailor merely tutted, then turned his back and returned to his comrades. As I watched him go, it felt as though a weight had been lifted from my chest.

I was stunned by the man’s fearlessness, but suddenly I realized how much that description applied to my own actions as well. If Lord Simeon had been there, I was quite certain he would have chided me strongly.

The southern people from the shop were all taken in; even that boy was marched away. I felt very sorry for him, but if he really had entered Lagrange illegally, then hopefully it would at least end quickly with him being deported. If he didn’t resist, there wouldn’t be any further violence against him. That was what I hoped, at least.

The crowd of onlookers began to disperse as well, leaving nothing but a bad aftertaste. I again expressed my gratitude to the man who had come to my rescue. “I really appreciate your kindness.” I gave a light curtsy.

He nodded. “You’re quite welcome. Are you all right by yourself? I don’t mind taking you home.”

I took a fleeting glance in the same direction he looked, and there a carriage was waiting. In front of it stood a servant and what appeared to be a boy.

I didn't sense any ulterior motive from the man. In any case, no one would have intended anything untoward with me. Even if I had been dressed more fashionably, my looks would have remained as plain as ever.

Even so, I couldn't accept his offer. If he took a shabby-looking woman home, then found that her home was a nobleman's manor, it would invite unwanted questions. Despite my unusual habits, I still had regard for keeping up appearances in society. I wanted to avoid sparking any rumors that I was putting on disguises and going out for walks entirely unaccompanied.

"Thank you very much for the offer," I replied, "but I'm all right on my own. It's not far from here."

I had refused politely, and he did not insist any further. "Oh? Still, it's dangerous for a lovely young woman to be walking alone, so be careful."

Smiling, he walked to his carriage. After a moment spent admiring the beautiful and elegant view of him from behind, I started walking in the direction I needed to go.

So many surprises all at once. For starters, why had it not been the police handling this, but the navy? It wouldn't be odd if it had happened at the port. The southerners mostly arrived by sea, so it would be the navy's responsibility to intercept them there. But in the middle of the city, wasn't it the police's jurisdiction?

That gentleman had also been quite a surprise. He was an outstanding beauty even amongst all the beautiful people I'd seen so far in my life. And he wasn't only good-looking—he had an air about him that was puzzling, perhaps even seductive. It was rare that someone made it so hard for me to know where to look. His rare combination of colors only made him seem more unique.

I wondered how old he was. About the same age as Lord Simeon, perhaps? He was almost certainly a nobleman; I was quite sure of that. His clothing was too elegant to think otherwise—and not only that, but when he spoke, he had seemed to be looking down on the sailor, talking as though he was certain of his own superiority. He must have been very confident that he'd be fine even if he

had been accused.

And yet, I had absolutely no recollection of seeing him before. Since my debut in society, I'd devoted myself to observing people. I'd never have missed someone as impressive as him. Of course, he could have been a nobleman from abroad. He had spoken fluent Lagrangian, but I had noticed some slight quirks in how he pronounced the words. *Someone with that pronunciation is probably...*

"Marielle!"

I was walking along lost in thought, so it was quite a shock to me when a voice called out and a hand pulled me by the arm. I let out a small scream and reflexively turned around to see a pair of light blue eyes right in front of me. "Oh."

A gallant and refined man stood before me, of the sort that could not help turning the heads of passers-by. His pale skin, light blue eyes and pale blonde hair put his appearance in stark contrast to the gentleman I'd just met. Pale hues have a tendency to make a weak impression, but with him that did not hold true at all. Slender though he was, his broad shoulders and his posture gave off a sense of strength and power.

"What a surprise to encounter someone who looks just like Lord Simeon. But that could never happen, so this must be an illusion. There couldn't be two people who are so dashing and wonderful, and that I can fangirl over so hard. It must be that I love Lord Simeon so much, I'm having a waking dream. Trust me to do such a thing!"

"Were you walking while half-asleep? Stop talking such poppycock and open your eyes instead."

"Ah, that response means you can only be the real Lord Simeon!"

The beautiful man furrowed his eyes and glared at me, and I smiled back. This overly practical response was most definitely that of Lord Simeon, my beloved fiancé.

"Good day! I didn't expect to bump into you somewhere like this." I enthusiastically embraced Lord Simeon. What a pleasant surprise, happening

upon Lord Simeon on a street corner. The bright scenery of spring appeared to shine even more. “What a coincidence, what an act of fate. There truly is a mysterious force that draws lovers together. Today is a good day indeed. Thank you, God!”

He paused a moment and then said, “Rather than celebrating, you might consider looking where you were going. Were you really paying so little attention?”

I looked back in the direction I’d been walking, where I noticed only now that I had narrowly avoided venturing into the road, where carriages were streaming past. “Goodness.”

Apparently I really had been too deep in thought. *That won’t do at all. It’s a bad habit.* The man from earlier had simply been so unique—so perfect a model to use in my books—that he had occupied my entire consciousness.

“I’m so sorry. I was thinking, that’s all.”

“Thinking about fangirling, no doubt. Please try to find somewhere safer for that. Don’t start daydreaming while you’re walking along the street.”

“Ooh, what a considerate lecture!”

“If you heard what I said, then stop fangirling! What are you even doing here on your own in the first place? And why are you dressed like that?”

Actually, why is Lord Simeon here? I stopped joking around and observed him seriously for a moment.

He was not wearing his royal guards’ uniform. Instead, he was clad in high-quality street clothes, and not even wearing his saber. He evidently wasn’t working at present.

“I had to visit my publisher,” I replied. “What about you, Lord Simeon? Do you have a day off today? Oh, and well done for noticing me in these clothes.”

“How could I fail to notice you? Your camouflage doesn’t fool me by now.”

“It’s not camouflage, it’s a disguise.”

“Call it whatever you like. I won’t tell you not to go out, but please, bring someone with you. It’s too dangerous for you to be obviously wandering

around on your own.”

“No it isn’t.” I turned away with a slightly sullen expression.

Lord Simeon put a hand on my shoulder and turned me around further.

“What is that?”

“What do you mean?” I followed his gaze and peered down at my back. An area of my dress that was hard to notice on my own was caked in dirt.

It must have stuck to me when I fell earlier. Oh dear, how embarrassing to have been walking around like this. Perhaps that was why that man had offered to take me home? If so, I wish he’d told me. It wasn’t very kind of him, just leaving without saying anything! I slightly revised my impression of him as a friendly person. To keep a straight face when a lady was in such a humiliating state did put a slight stain on his character.

“Oh, well,” I replied, hesitating. “I had a minor tumble.”

He looked at me. “Apparently there was a roundup just now, back in that direction. I hear the navy made quite a scene.”

“Gosh, word certainly reaches you quickly.”

“Seeing you in that state, it makes me wonder if you got caught up in it.”

“I did, yes... It was all so sudden, everyone around me was quite shocked as well.” Implying that I’d been pushed over by the jostling crowd, I put on a face that hinted at nothing else. I definitely did not say that I’d leapt out in front of a sailor to stop him from using his baton.

He did not look convinced at all. “Later, when there’s time, we can discuss this properly. For now, this way.”

With his clear pronouncement ringing in my ears that questioning and a lecture were still to come, I followed him to a carriage. It was some distance away. *Did he spot me from this far away? He’s like a hawk hunting down his prey! Wait, no, that’s not right. It’s definitely the power of love!*

“Ideally I’d prefer to take you home straight away, but there’s no time, so can I ask you to accompany me for now?”

“I’m not in any particular hurry, so I don’t mind. Where are we going?”

We both climbed in, and the carriage set off immediately. The driver chose his route freely, having presumably been informed of the destination already. From the scenery that flew past the window, I could tell that we were heading not toward the noble district in the north, but southward.

“To the port,” Lord Simeon replied. “When I saw you, I was on my way there to meet someone.”

Aha, I thought, so that’s why he’s traveling in a proper closed two-horse carriage rather than an open one. It all made sense.

Then I caught myself in a mild panic. *It doesn’t make sense at all!* “Hold on a moment. If you’re going to meet someone, I can’t accompany you. Not like this. I can’t be seen with you in these clothes.”

Right now I was dressed as a poverty-stricken lady, and I was covered in mud to boot. It was hardly a fitting guise for the (soon-to-be) bride of the heir to the esteemed House Flaubert.

“We’ll have to make do,” he replied. “I’ll find some suitable enough way to excuse it.”

“There’s no possible way. No matter what you say, the person you’re meeting will find it unspeakably strange. Unless you tell them I’m simply an acquaintance you happened upon?”

“This is someone who will see you again in the future, so we can’t tell him that.”

“Then let me out after all. I’ll hail a fiacre to take me home.”

“I can’t simply let you go home on your own. Not in that state.”

“You don’t need to treat it so seriously, as if it’s your responsibility. No one else even knows that we met in the city today.”

“It’s a question of my feelings.”

“And what about my feelings!?”

I kept half an eye on the window as we argued. When I looked outside to see whether we were situated somewhere that would be reasonable to drop me off, I saw a particular shop pass by. Without thinking, I shouted at the top of my

lungs, “Stop!”

Panicked by my sudden outcry, the driver pulled on the reins without waiting for Lord Simeon’s instruction. The carriage jerked to a halt and I turned to face Lord Simeon. “Do you really have absolutely no time to spare at all? Could you wait one hour? No, thirty minutes?”

Despite his apparent state of shock, Lord Simeon gave an entirely serious answer to my question. “I left early to allow myself some leeway, so it wouldn’t be disastrous...but what do you mean to do?”

“There. Madame Pelagie’s shop.” I pointed to the shop we had just passed. Even for Sans-Terre, the city of flowers, it had a remarkably opulent exterior. A luxurious dress was on display in the large front window. “The dress I ordered should be ready by now. It’s perfect for this situation. I’ll go in there and get changed.”

What good fortune I was having that day. Perhaps I’d been visited by a guardian angel.

A broad smile lit up my face, and Lord Simeon did not raise any objections.

Chapter Three

The carriage bounced rhythmically as it sped along the paving stones. The roads were crowded near the port, and accidents were common, but today we faced no interruptions and we were able to travel to our destination with relative ease.

While outside the world grew livelier, the inside of the carriage cut a stark contrast. An odd silence hung over us.

It's not that we'd had a fight, or that Lord Simeon had told me off for something. Nothing in particular had happened. Only my appearance had changed. I had gone from a decidedly plain appearance to a rather glamorous one. That was all.

After changing my clothes at Madame Pelagie's shop, I also had them reapply my makeup from scratch. After all, if I'd changed from head to toe—dress, hat, shoes—so that everything I wore was top quality and represented the latest fashion, it didn't seem fitting to leave my face plain. The attendants in the shop, too, had all unanimously recommended it. As befitting such a long-established boutique, they beautified my face with techniques that measured up to those of my friends the Three Flowers, the very best courtesans from the city's finest brothel.

This was not meant as a disguise. One might say that this was my true self as a noblewoman, and I had simply returned to it. Though perhaps "true self" wasn't accurate either. I had practically turned into a different person. You couldn't call it anything other than a transformation. Either way, it was most certainly *not* a disguise. Rather, it was what they call style.

Even so, when Lord Simeon looked at my transformed appearance, his expression spoke of severely mixed feelings. He was silent and somewhat glum, unable to speak a word of praise at how pretty I had become. The same thing had happened once before. Lord Simeon seemed not to like it when I got dressed up.

Finding this rather lamentable, I let out a sigh. It was for Lord Simeon's benefit that I had forsaken my principle of dressing and decorating myself as safely as possible so that I wouldn't stand out at all. I had made myself stylish for him.

It had also been quite a firm request from his mother, Countess Estelle. Above and beyond that, however, stood my own desire to look good. I couldn't change the face I had been born with, but I still wanted to do what I could to look cute, if only slightly. I wanted the person I loved to feel the same way. *Making myself beautiful and then wanting my significant other to appreciate it... That's a thoroughly normal feeling, isn't it? I am a woman, after all. I'd rather not be plain and dull, always and forever, in front of the man I love.*

And yet.

"Do you dislike it that much?" I asked him. The feeling had only grown in intensity as we'd sat in silence, and at last I couldn't bear it any longer.

"Dislike what?" He looked at me with puzzled eyes. At times like this, Lord Simeon's glasses felt incredibly cold.

"Does it displease you for me to overdo my makeup to the extent that my face is a complete forgery and I could even be awarded the esteemed title of Lucifer of Lies?"

"I've never heard of that title before. You're calling yourself that of your own volition." As always, after an initial joking reply, he cleared his throat and began again. "It's not so excessive that I'd ever describe it that way. Admittedly, you create a very different impression, but mostly I'm in awe at seeing the amount of hard work that goes into a lady's appearance."

"That effort leads gentlemen to be drawn in completely, fully believing that it's a lady's innocent, unadorned beauty. Then, the morning after their wedding ceremony, they finally see their bride without makeup for the first time, and realize they've been had...but by then it's too late. Yes, I'm certain it breeds a lot of resentment."

"You're starting to depress me, so please stop. In any case, I saw your usual face first, so it's hardly the same situation."

Indeed, I suppose not. Lord Simeon had proposed to me in full knowledge that I was an unappealingly plain woman. Did that mean it was fine for me to simply be myself, without going to such great effort?

If so I was glad—but even then, I wanted to be complimented on my appearance if I *had* taken the trouble.

“Couldn’t you at least show a tiny bit of happiness when I’ve made myself beautiful? Even while knowing it’s a forgery, couldn’t you still find some appeal in it?”

“You’ve got it all wrong,” he replied after a pause.

“But you always look so sullen. I can’t simply leave my face plain if I’m wearing such a glamorous dress. It would seem absurdly mismatched. There’s no solution other than heavy makeup.” As I spoke, I gradually became more and more agitated, and my tone grew more forceful.

“No, as I’m trying to tell you, you’ve misunderstood. Could you please calm down?”

I stopped, held at bay by Lord Simeon’s words. He adjusted his glasses and sighed. That was his habit when he was vexed. When he did not meet my gaze and instead looked away, it meant he was lost as to what he should say next.

Not that I had ever meant to cause him such vexation, of course.

“It might not be your preference,” I added despondently, “but I’d appreciate it if you could grin and bear it, at least. It’s a problem for a lady joining House Flaubert to be too plain—that’s what Countess Estelle told me. She’s had quite a number of dresses made for me, so I can’t let them go to waste. When I go out into society I’ll be the Lucifer of Lies, but I’ll be my usual plain self at all other times.”

Lord Simeon smiled. “You really are fond of that title, aren’t you?” He put an arm around my shoulders and gently drew me close to him. “I’m sorry for making you misunderstand. You can dress up and decorate yourself as much as you wish. I don’t find it unpleasant at all. I’m simply a little bewildered by it.”

At last his kind voice and temperament had returned. I looked up at him from my close perspective. “Because I look like a different person?”

“I’ve never thought that. No matter what appearance you adopt, I never mistake you.” He spoke those words with a great deal of confidence, and I readily believed them. Yes, Lord Simeon always found me. No matter how many people were around, whether I was a princess or a poor flower girl, I was certain he would always notice me.

I was left with a slightly unresolved feeling. Why exactly was he so bewildered, then? But his kind eyes were getting closer, so I didn’t mind brushing that feeling aside. Instead, I closed my eyes and waited for his lips to reach mine.

Just as his hair brushed my cheeks, the carriage door flew open.

“We’ve arri— Oh, goodness, my apologies!”

The driver turned away in shock. At some point, the carriage had stopped and I hadn’t even realized. I’d simply been so engrossed in our conversation. Uncharacteristically for Lord Simeon, he hadn’t realized either.

We had been stopped just before our lips met. We moved away from each other, slightly embarrassed.

“How unfortunate,” uttered Lord Simeon.

Well, these things do happen.

Pulling ourselves together and expressing our gratitude to the driver, we left the carriage. We were right at the entrance to the port. There was a waiting area for stagecoaches, where those who had driven there individually appeared to leave their carriages as well. The wharf for passenger ships was a short walk away.

The port was congested at all hours with people coming and going from the kingdom. I had removed my glasses to better suit the dress, so I borrowed Lord Simeon’s arm as I walked. It wouldn’t do for me to cling on to him in an indecent fashion, but I did hold on rather tightly. I feared that if I didn’t, I’d be separated from him by the crowds and lose him completely.

“That reminds me,” I asked, remembering why we had come to the port in the first place, “who is it you’re meeting here? You were going entirely on your own, so it must be someone you’re quite close to. Who on earth could be

arriving?”

The realization that he hadn't yet told me sparked on his face. “Ah yes,” he said, guarding me against an endless stream of people almost bumping into me. “It's my brother. The older of my two younger brothers has returned to Lagrange.”

What did he just say? I was lost for words at him stating such a thing so casually.

“Your brother?”

“Yes. You've already met my youngest brother, Noel. The one between us in age, Adrien, is returning from his overseas assignment in Gandia. He unfortunately couldn't be here for the meeting of my family and yours, but he had to return in time for the wedding ceremony.”

“And you didn't think to tell me that until now!?”

In response to my protestations, Lord Simeon blinked. “Is something the matter?”

“How can you even ask!?”

That had been *far* too close for comfort. My first meeting with my future brother-in-law had almost been with me in disguise—something I definitely wished to avoid. *I'm so glad I changed. Thank you, Madame Pelagie!*

Lord Simeon looked mystified by how perturbed I was. *But how on earth did he intend to introduce me dressed like that? He's supposed to be a serious man, a man of good sense. Is he slowly losing all rationality after all? Is it my influence?*

Lord Simeon was the oldest of Earl Flaubert's three children. The youngest brother, Lord Noel, was only fifteen. There was a difference of twelve years between him and Lord Simeon, and, as is sometimes the case with the youngest, Countess Estelle doted on him immensely. We'd met each other numerous times, and if there was any young man who could be described as having the face of an angel, it was him. That said, I did have my eye on him. I suspected that at heart he was actually a mischievous rascal.

The middle brother, Lord Adrien, would now be twenty-four years old. He was a military officer and had been assigned to a posting in Gandia, so I hadn't met him yet.

Gandia, a country far to the south, had formerly been a colony of Lagrange for more than one hundred years, but had now been an independent nation again for around thirty. However, despite Lagrange relinquishing its sovereignty over Gandia, we had not entirely given up our influence there. To a great extent, Gandia was still a vassal state. This of course meant there were many there who opposed Lagrange's strong influence, and that any of our nationals staying in Gandia were beset by danger. Due to this, quite a number of military officers were stationed there.

The shortest route between the two countries took ten days. Going via land meant taking a long and treacherous route over mountains, valleys, and deserts, so it was more common to go by sea. The coastline curved in a grand circle around the Bastro Sea, so ultimately, the two countries were rather close if you drew a straight line between them. Lagrange in the north and Gandia in the south were facing directly across from one another, separated by the sea.

As we reached the wharf to greet the returning visitor, his ship was already letting off its passengers.

I didn't know Lord Adrien's face, and even if I had, I wouldn't have been able to see it without my glasses. Since I couldn't help look for him, I stood quietly beside Lord Simeon.

Suddenly, the man himself spotted us and ran toward us. "Brother!" he called out cheerfully as he sprinted through the crowd. Even though I could only vaguely make him out, I had a clear sense of the sheer joy he exuded. He reminded me of a dog running to its owner.

Lord Simeon was rather tall, but Lord Adrien, remarkably, was even taller. His blond hair—cropped short as you'd expect from a member of the armed forces—was the very same golden shade as my next-door neighbor's beloved pet dog. Even in civilian clothes, his well-honed physique was evident at first glance.

House Flaubert definitely breeds these military men. Lord Simeon's grandfather, the former earl, had been a general. The current head of the

family, with his more literary disposition, stood in contrast, but the military spirit had clearly been inherited in abundance by the grandsons.

Lord Adrien stopped in front of us, his face a picture of delight. “So good to see you again! Glad you’re looking well!”

He reminded me more and more of my neighbor’s dog. He looked just like the dog did when you threw a ball and he ran back, eyes sparkling as if to say, “Tell me I’m a good boy!” *How unbearably cute!*

“Same to you. You’re in good spirits, same as always, I see!”

Lord Simeon responded in a much more informal manner than I was used to. This was a reunion between brothers who hadn’t seen each other in years. It was a joyous affair involving clapping each other on the shoulder.

“You’re rather tanned,” Lord Simeon added.

“The sun over there is so damned hot. But I’m used to the heat, so now Lagrange’s spring feels cold to me, I’m afraid.”

“You look as though you’re coping. Whenever I see you, you’re always far too cheerful for your own good. Still, I’m glad you got here in one piece. Marielle, this is Adrien.” Lord Simeon kindly introduced his brother to me straight away, rather than leaving me to stand there while the two of them enjoyed being reunited with one another. In turn, he then introduced me to Lord Adrien. “This is my fiancée, Miss Marielle Clarac. I wrote to you about her, you remember.”

Lord Adrien looked at me, and in an instant his face went rigid. All the sparkling joy disappeared.

Eh?

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Adrien. I’m Marielle Clarac. I’m so glad you’ve arrived safely after your long journey.”

Though internally I had cocked my head in confusion, on the outside I curtsied enthusiastically, doing my best to be as elegant and refined as possible. If my etiquette teacher had seen me, I’m sure I’d have received effusive praise. My future brother-in-law got the most courteous introduction I could muster.

But I did not receive a particularly compelling response. “Charmed,” he

murmured, looking away.

Have I done something to offend him? It was inconceivable when all I'd done was offer a polite introduction.

I quietly waited for him to continue, but he did not return his attention to me, aside from intermittent sidelong glances. Since I didn't have my glasses on I couldn't make out the fine details of his expression, which only made me more uneasy. I covertly looked up at Lord Simeon.

Lord Simeon, too, appeared puzzled. He opened his well-formed mouth as if to say something, but before he could, another voice interrupted.

"Adrien, why did you just suddenly run off and leave me?"

I turned to see where this youthful voice filled with reproach was coming from, and saw a man running in our direction.

"Francis?" murmured Lord Simeon.

The man heard Lord Simeon and looked in his direction. He too went rigid, freezing in place for a moment. I squinted but couldn't make out his expression. However, he quickly started moving again and finally came to a stop in front of us.

"Hello there, Simeon. Good to see you again." He smiled and spoke in a gentle manner. He appeared to be roughly the same age as Lord Adrien.

"It has been some time since you were last back. About a year, I believe?"

"Indeed. I've been so busy down there, you see. More importantly, congratulations on your engagement. Is that the lady herself?"

Rather than spending more time enjoying the reunion, he turned straight to me. He didn't have conspicuously dashing looks of the sort that Lord Simeon possessed. Rather, he looked quite ordinary, with suitably ordinary dark brown hair. I felt something of a kinship with him.

"Yes, this is my fiancée, Miss Marielle Clarac. Marielle, this is my friend Francis Louvier. We've known each other for a very long time. He's a childhood friend, as they say."

Lord Simeon's childhood friend? That made him a key figure indeed. I once

again curtsied with an entirely prim and proper expression. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Louvier. I’m Marielle Clarac.”

“It’s an honor to have the chance to meet you, Miss Marielle. Please, call me Francis. Though I have been graciously called a friend, my father was merely the second son of a viscount, so there is quite a difference in rank between my family and House Flaubert. As such, there is no need for you to stand on such ceremony.”

“Oh, but I’m also a viscount’s daughter. Lord Simeon is marrying me despite quite a large difference in rank. We might find we have a thing or two in common!”

“I’m honored to be told that by a direct lineal descendant like yourself.”

Lord Francis was faultlessly polite and never lost his gentle smile. However, I had the impression that he was keeping himself at a distance. *Does being a lineal descendant rather than a collateral descendent really make such a difference?* It might have mattered for a prestigious family like House Flaubert, but if a minor viscountcy like mine fussed over that, we’d be laughed at by all society, and that would be the end of that.

“You’re such a pretty young lady,” Lord Francis continued. “Was it love at first sight, then?” He spoke in a teasing tone. He’d apparently been entirely taken in by the Lucifer of Lies.

He was hinting at the fact that if Lord Simeon was marrying someone ranked so much lower, it must mean that he was really taken with her. Lord Francis’s understanding of the situation was entirely natural—and, surprisingly enough, it was the truth. However, it wasn’t my face that had clinched it. Everything *but* that. Behind my smile, I silently apologized for deceiving him.

“Something along those lines,” said Lord Simeon, deflecting the question with a smile. *I suppose you can’t simply say that it wasn’t my face that caught your eye, but my eccentricity.* He went on, “I hadn’t heard that you’d be returning to Lagrange as well. I’m a little surprised.”

“Not only me. There’s one more as well.” Lord Francis turned around, and I looked in the same direction.

Amongst the continual stream of people rushing past, one person had stopped and was looking our way. She wore the unaffected clothes of a gentleman, so for a moment I thought she was a man—but even without my glasses, I knew otherwise immediately.

“Thank goodness you actually remembered me! After you both ran off and started talking without me, I thought you might have forgotten I existed.”

There was a jesting tone in her feminine voice, along with a mature self-assurance and allure. Even in men’s clothes, and with her hair cut so short that it didn’t reach her shoulders, the blurry outline of her body was clearly that of a woman. The beautiful face approaching smiled, overflowing with self-confidence like a large flower blooming proudly.

A...a beautiful woman in men’s clothes?

FANGIRL INFERNO!

Before I knew it, I was on the verge of abandoning my prim facade and succumbing to heavy breathing. How astounding! A sight that I’d never expected to see outside of a story was here, before my very eyes! I couldn’t believe I had the chance to meet a person like this in real life!

She came over and stood between Lord Adrien and Lord Francis. When she caught a glimpse of me, her smile deepened.

My word, she’s even more beautiful up close. I wish I had my glasses on so I could see her more clearly. My heart won’t stop pounding!



“Rose,” said Lord Simeon, surprise evident in his voice. So, this person was called Lady Rose. A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.

“Good to see you again, Simeon. How many years has it been? I see you’re a fine upstanding gentleman, as ever you were.”

“Indeed,” he replied after a moment, “it has been quite a few years. You appear to be well.”

Their manner of exchanging greetings had an undercurrent of intimacy. I could tell straight away that they weren’t mere acquaintances.

So then...what relationship *did* they have?

“You’ve cut your hair,” said Lord Simeon.

“It suits me, doesn’t it? It’s the latest fashion. It says: from now on, women are playing an active role! Or some such. To begin with, it was mostly just a show of courage. I didn’t want those around me to underestimate me. But honestly, I’ve really grown accustomed to it.”

“You haven’t changed. You always were such a strong person.” Lord Simeon’s gaze softened. He appeared to have recovered from his initial surprise.

My heart was beating out of my chest for an entirely different reason than before.

What is this feeling? My heart is pounding so hard, it’s almost painful. Am I jealous? All they’re doing is having the normal conversation you’d expect of friends upon being reunited!

“Are you going to introduce me?”

Lady Rose looked at me again. She was tall to begin with, and was wearing high-heeled shoes despite her men’s clothing, so she stood about half a head taller than me. As she gazed down at me, it made me feel as though she was looking at a child.

She was, in fact, quite a bit older than me. I didn’t know for certain, but she might have been the same age as Lord Simeon, or even slightly older.

“I’ve been waiting with bated breath,” she continued. “Or are you scared to

let a woman like me get too close to your precious fiancée?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Marielle, this is Rose Bellecour...if it’s still correct to call you that?”

“It’s correct,” Lady Rose replied. “I’m not married, and being driven out of my house didn’t change my name.”

“Then this is Rose Bellecour, another friend of mine.”

This short exchange had hinted at some rather complicated circumstances. Lord Simeon had barely said a word apart from her name, but from that alone I had gained some knowledge.

I asked, “Do you have some relation to Baron Bellecour?”

Lady Rose’s eyebrows arched in surprise. “You’re certainly well-versed. I wondered if he might have finally fallen into ruin by now, but evidently he’s still plodding along.” Despite her casual phrasing and easy smile, her words were quite scathing. “I am a relative of his, but please, don’t worry about that. Nowadays I’m just plain Rose. I work for a state-run trading company in Gandia. Francis is a colleague of mine, and we’ve benefited from Adrien’s services as a guard on many occasions. Pleased to meet you.”

“I’m Marielle Clarac. It’s a pleasure.”

Far from being on the verge of ruin, Baron Bellecour was a very wealthy man. He was also influential, and often seen in high society as well. With a relative like that, such a beautiful woman would have no lack of marriage proposals. I wondered what on earth had happened in Lady Rose’s past. It was rude for me to have such strong curiosity, but I was quite intrigued nonetheless.

I tried to recall what I’d heard about Baron Bellecour. *Hmm, wasn’t he originally born as the second son? His older brother died young, and that was why he inherited the barony.*

Lady Rose returned her attention to Lord Simeon. “I heard from Adrien that you were engaged. When he said that it wasn’t merely a marriage of convenience arranged between houses, but that you’d chosen your fiancée for yourself, I was very interested to see what kind of person she was. I’d never have imagined you mustering up so much enthusiasm for any woman.”

“It’s true,” Lord Francis interjected cheerfully, “I was also quite surprised, but when I saw her, I understood why Simeon would go for her. She suits him well.”

“Absolutely,” she replied. “This sort of sweet and innocent girl is perfect for such an obstinate fool. I’m only glad he hasn’t been drawn in by some unpleasant terror of a woman.”

Lord Francis laughed. “Simeon would never make a blunder like that.”

“Though she does look as though she might be something of a pushover. Be careful, Marielle. Don’t let him manipulate you.”

“Stop putting funny ideas in her head, Rose,” said Lord Simeon at last, albeit with a wry smile.

The only one who did not join in with this banter amongst close friends was Lord Adrien. He stayed firmly silent, though he continued to occasionally glance in my direction.

I would not have described his attitude as cordial, certainly, but he didn’t appear to be in a bad mood either. I didn’t sense any hostility or ill will. Was it simple shyness? Was he left feeling bashful upon meeting a woman for the first time? I did have that impression somehow, and it felt strangely charming given how much older he was than me.

My feelings toward Lady Rose, on the other hand, were decidedly mixed. *I think she’s a wonderful person, definitely. When she smiles at me, my heart races. She’s a woman, but dashing like a man, all without losing her feminine glamor and sensuality.*

She was a beauty of the variety that would draw the eye of both men and women, all of whom would wish they could be like her. I was fangirling too hard for words.

And yet, watching her talk to Lord Simeon, I felt a vague unease and apprehension.

It was the first time I’d seen Lord Simeon with a woman that he was so close to. I’d never seen him show much interest in women, and he himself had told me that he didn’t tend to seek their company. All his friends that I knew of were men, and I’d never heard of any women he was close to other than, at most, his

cousin.

Thus I had assumed, entirely on my own, that he did not have any relationships with women that went beyond the level of polite formality. I had thought that there would be no other woman that he would smile and laugh with from the bottom of his heart.

And yet, thinking about it properly, this had been a foolish assumption. He had neither a hatred nor a fear of women. He was a normal adult man. If there was a person he had a favorable impression of, it didn't matter if she was a woman; of course he would have a friendly relationship with her. He might have even had lovers in the past.

Could he have been...with her...?

Watching their reunion with all its nostalgia and joy, I didn't feel any of the sparks that sometimes fly between a man and a woman. It was also clear that they hadn't seen each other in many years—and from the sounds of things, they hadn't been in correspondence either. They had fallen out of touch to such an extent that they only heard news through other people. There was nothing to worry about whatsoever.

But...what kind of relationship *did* the two of them have? This was a question I was painfully eager to ask. Keeping silent and maintaining a smile took far, far more effort than usual.

Rather than spending longer talking at the port, Lord Simeon took Lord Francis and Lady Rose to their hotel, then took me home as well. He didn't follow up about my presence at the navy's crackdown earlier that day. Knowing Lord Simeon, he wouldn't have forgotten. More likely, he simply didn't want to discuss it in front of Lord Adrien. *Hopefully he'll forget to bring it up later.*

A few days after Lord Adrien and I first met at the port, he visited my house with Lord Simeon.

Lord Simeon had let us know in advance, so everything was prepared for their arrival. My mother was unfortunately busy visiting another family, but that presented no problem for our diligent servants. They knew exactly what to do and made sure the house was ready.

Indeed, it was not people that caused the problem, but animals.

Just as I was expecting my guests' arrival, a fight broke out between our cat and our neighbors' dog, who had decided to invade our front garden. I stepped in to try and break them up.

"Ugh, is that Lord Simeon's carriage approaching already? I don't suppose you could ask him to— Chouchou, stop! Don't bully Max like that! And Max, calm down! Why are you letting yourself be pushed around when you're so much bigger!"

The cat's usually sweet and lovely meows had given way to a threatening screech, and the dog had reacted by yelping in fear. All in all, there was quite a to-do in my front garden. The root cause of it all was the dog trespassing on the cat's territory. It was a delight that Max was so comfortable around people, but he did have a touch of bad manners. He must have remembered the last time I had given him a treat and escaped from his own house to come here seeking another. When I looked to see how he had gotten in, I saw a hole dug in the ground underneath the fence. *His owners are giving him plenty of food, surely. Does he really want a treat that badly?*

Unfortunately for Max, our house had a fierce guard cat. Cute as Chouchou was, with her elegant coat and blue eyes, she showed no mercy to intruders. She had begun with a pre-emptive strike on the nose, and followed up with a series of scratches to the dog's face. Before long, Max had lost his will to fight, and all that remained was a one-sided pursuit. The dog ran away, knocking over a flower pot in the process, while the cat gave chase, trampling all over the flower beds that had only just begun to sprout. My older brother, who loved flowers, would certainly be quite upset to see the disastrous scene when he got home.

I stepped between them. This meant making myself vulnerable, so I had to guard against the risk of my own blood being spilled. I spread out the shawl I was holding ready and threw it over the cat. In the brief moment when she couldn't run away, I quickly scooped her up into my arms. "All right, it's over now. Be a good girl and stop being angry." She continued raging for a moment while wrapped up in the shawl, but as I soothed her, she finally calmed down.

Seeing that his fearsome foe had been captured, Max regained his confidence and began to bark aggressively.

“What are you still so excited about?” said Lord Simeon, picking him up by the scruff of the neck. At last, Max fell silent.

I hadn’t even noticed him walk up to me. “Thank you, Lord Simeon!”

“You’re not hurt?” he asked me, putting the dog down. Max, always ready to flee at the sign of a strong opponent, did nothing to defy Lord Simeon. He stayed where he was and adopted a sitting position.

“No, I’m fine,” I replied.

“You handled that well, I’d say.”

“Oh, I’m used to this. It happens about once a week.”

“Really? Once a week?”

“He’s a good boy really, but he never learns his lesson about this.”

As we spoke, my neighbor arrived, having followed his dog here after hearing the commotion. He took Max away with many bows and apologies. *No doubt he’ll be back here in a few days.*

“I’m so sorry you had to arrive amidst all this. Please, come inside.” I did my best to assume a sufficiently respectable demeanor and ushered both Lord Simeon and his brother inside. Lord Simeon began to follow immediately, but for some reason Lord Adrien stayed frozen where he was.

Noticing this, Lord Simeon turned back. “Adrien?”

His eyes fixed on me, Lord Adrien asked, “Who is that?”

Lord Simeon and I looked at one another for a moment. Only then did I realize. *Of course! My face looked entirely different!*

Today, my face was back to its usual plain appearance. I was also wearing my glasses. As such, this was my first opportunity to get a proper look at Lord Adrien’s face. He had handsome features, but he didn’t resemble Lord Simeon all that strongly. He was more masculine, and looked almost as though a mischievous young boy had grown into an adult without his appearance

changing significantly. His eyes were a pale shade of brown.

It seems the oldest and youngest brothers take after their mother, while the middle one takes after their father. Even so, looking closely, there was some family resemblance.

“Adrien, don’t be rude.”

“Oh, I don’t mind,” I interjected, cutting off my fiancé at the pass. “I looked so different the other day, it’s no surprise he’d be confused. Many apologies, Lord Adrien. This is how I really look.”

Lord Adrien’s eyes and mouth fell open. For a moment he was rendered speechless. “But...” he began at last. “The beautiful woman from the other day... Where is she?”

“She was an illusion.”

“An...illusion...?”

“Crafted by the Lucifer of Lies.”

Silence for a moment—and then Lord Adrien shrieked, “What!?” He stood there at the entrance to my house, stupefied by the shock of it all, simply repeating the same words over and over again. “Illusion... Lies...”

“Adrien,” his brother interrupted.

“Simeon, is this true? Is this woman really such a fraud? And you’re still marrying her, in full knowledge of this?”

“Hold your tongue at once and apologize to Marielle. I won’t permit such effrontery.”

“Effrontery? It’s no more than the truth! The difference in her appearance is simply too vast to measure. She’s an entirely different person. Seeing her charming, captivating visage the other day, sweet as a fairy or an angel, I decided that if a woman as beautiful as this was standing beside my older brother, I could allow it. But it was all an illusion, a pack of lies!” He spat out the words, full of anger. “In truth, she’s an ugly cow!”

Lord Simeon silently stepped forward. His light blue eyes were ice cold, so I knew he was furious, but it still surprised me when he punched his brother.

Having been unprepared for this, Lord Adrien was stunned in the most literal sense. He fell to the ground.

“Lord Simeon!” I ran up to him, forgetting all about the cat in my arms, who took her chance to run away when my hold loosened.

“What was that for?” said Lord Adrien.

“It should be obvious,” Lord Simeon replied. “Frankly, if you weren’t my brother, I’d have drawn my sword.”

“This is all wrong!” I cried. “For a situation such as this, the riding crop is most suitable! Hitting him with your fists lacks any kind of grace. Well, I suppose there is something appealing about this unexpected turn to violence...but a punishment from the Demon Vice Captain simply *must* be administered with the riding crop!”

“Hold on there!” said Lord Adrien. True to his military background, he was not bothered by a little pain; he stood straight back up as he objected to my own objection. “In what sense is that an appropriate way of asking him to stop!? What in the world does a riding crop have to do with any of this!?”

“Oh, you weren’t aware? The most suitable weapon for Lord Simeon is absolutely the riding crop. My word, just imagining it makes my heart begin to race!”

“He’s my brother! Don’t make him sound like some sort of pervert!”

“Pervert? How rude! He’s not a pervert at all. He’s a brutal black-hearted military officer.”

“Is that supposed to be *more* respectful!? Simeon, this woman is deranged! You can’t seriously be intending to marry her!”

“She’s an intelligent person. She merely has an unusual character.”

“You’re deranged as well!”

It was a sign of my servants’ excellence that they did not lose their composure even as we argued. The butler led us expertly into the house without any sign of acknowledgment on his face, and somehow all present made it to the drawing room where we could sit.

Lord Adrien did not even touch his tea. He simply buried his head in his hands. “It’s beyond belief, Simeon. How could you lose your mind to a woman of her ilk?”

Lord Simeon and I sat next to each other facing him. Lord Simeon watched his younger brother’s distressed ranting with some measure of disgust.

“You’ve always been so remarkable, so awe-inspiring. No one could ever measure up to you, in military or academic pursuits. Everyone said so. You even have the confidence of His Highness the Crown Prince. All this time, you’ve been someone I felt so proud to call my brother.”

“I agree with every word of that,” I interrupted. “Lord Simeon is simply wonderful. I’ve never met a more remarkable, more awe-inspiring man.”

“He’s strict with himself and others, but he’s a kind and thoughtful person nonetheless. He always covered for me. When I made mischief he would hit me, but then afterwards he would always come with me so we could apologize together.”

“Absolutely! Even his subordinates simply adore him, no matter how much he terrifies them.”

“I don’t know of anyone I could call as fine a person as my brother. He’s my pride and joy, the ideal I aim to live up to. He is my idol.”

“You really do love Lord Simeon, don’t you, Lord Adrien? It’s wonderful to see such affection between brothers. Though I must say, one false step and you’d be entering the realm of Julianne’s favorite books. Brothers are a staple of the genre.”

“Who’s Julianne?” he asked.

“My best friend. She simply loves stories about people like you, Lord Adrien.”

“What...kind of stories? In any case, yes, I hold my brother in higher esteem than anybody else in this world. Hearing that he was to marry left me with decidedly mixed feelings, but I decided that as long as he was happy, it was all right. He would, after all, choose the best woman he possibly could. And when I met you, I thought, goodness gracious, she is quite a lady. Not that there was any need for *my* heart to be the one set racing, but you were the very essence

of my own personal taste! I was struck with full force, believing you were the one—the one suitable to be my brother’s bride. I decided to stay quiet, and silently give you my blessing, which made me sad in its own way, but at the same time I felt so reassured. All those thoughts ran through my mind...and yet...!”

Lord Adrien lifted his head, grinding his teeth as he did so.

“And yet it’s all a complete fraud! Where did that beautiful woman go? Is this the sad reality? That when you remove your makeup, you’re no more than a horrid beast in glasses!?”

“It’s true! I agree with you wholeheartedly!”

“You’re not supposed to agree with me!” he shouted.

At that same moment, Lord Simeon lifted up his cane and ruthlessly whacked his brother’s golden head with it. I could feel the pain in the sound it made.

“Don’t you dare describe her in such a coarse and insulting manner. It seems you’ve lost all sense of decorum since joining the navy.”

“Simeon...” Tears formed in Lord Adrien’s eyes. It seemed that this strike had made an impact.

“You don’t have to keep hitting him,” I said.

“You should be at least somewhat angry with him as well, Marielle. He’s being a complete imbecile, so you needn’t bother being polite.”

However, Lord Simeon’s earnest indignation did not trigger a similar rage in me. Rather, I felt a smile begin to form as I fangirled over him. I chuckled. “Oh, Lord Simeon, you’re too kind, but Lord Adrien is only speaking the truth. When I apply so much makeup, the way I look is no more than a deception.”

Lord Simeon replied very deliberately. “I’m not saying this out of favoritism, or merely as an effort to comfort you. You have features that allow for a significant change when makeup is applied. By putting in such great effort, your look changes dramatically, and you take on an unexpectedly glamorous appearance. This surprised me a great deal, as you made such a different impression from your usual self. However, it was not as though your face itself

had changed.”

“You’re essentially saying that because my face is plain, it’s a suitable canvas for any makeup I might apply?”

“Precisely. Honestly speaking, you don’t have such strong, distinguishing features that anyone could begin to describe you as ugly.”

Lord Adrien cut in, “Well, no, Simeon, I’m not sure I’d agree with—”

“Besides, it wasn’t your face that drew me to you. Your worth is what’s inside. It offends me that anyone would mock you based on your appearance alone without even learning what kind of person you are.”

Good heavens, it’s so achingly lovely when Lord Simeon flatters me like that! And the man himself has no idea he’s being so seductive, which is so amusing somehow. No matter what anyone said, Lord Simeon’s very presence was enough to lift my spirits into the sky.

“Oh, thank you, Lord Simeon. And I love your kindness, your serious side, and how adorable you can be at times!” I moved closer to him on the couch and nestled up against him. “And your black-hearted exterior, your menacing aura that’s been described as akin to a hired assassin, your Grim Reaper-esque strength... I adore them all!”

“Was all that meant as a compliment!?” spluttered Lord Adrien.

“Of course!” I turned back to him as Lord Simeon put his arm around me. “Lord Adrien, we’re actually rather alike. We’re both members of the Lord Simeon Love and Support League.”

“How dare you! I am a member of no such league! You and I have *nothing* in common!”

“I like you, Lord Adrien. You’re just like Max from next door.”

“Max? The dog from earlier!?” he yelped animatedly. “What in blazes could we possibly have in common? Admittedly my hair is much the same color as his fur, but...”

His reaction was too darling for words, and all sense that I needed to feel nervous in front of Lord Adrien—or try to maintain a prim and proper facade—

flew out of the window. It didn't matter if I let him know the real me. Quite the contrary, I wanted him to know it. I wanted him to make friends with the real me.

After all, Lord Adrien was, to put it bluntly, obsessed with his brother. He idolized Lord Simeon so much that even finding out he was getting married left him with mixed feelings. Then he discovered that the future bride appealed so much to his own tastes that he couldn't even look at her directly. Then, while he was experiencing these two sets of deeply complicated feelings, he had discovered that this beautiful lady was actually a plain girl who had constructed an illusion, and he had fallen out of love in an instant. It was all far too idiotic and pathetic and amusing.

Lord Simeon looked at me as if to ask if I was really all right, and I smiled back at him. *I'm not offended at all, nor are my feelings hurt, of course.* There was no malicious intent behind Lord Adrien's bad attitude. It was no more than an instinctive panicked reaction—a window into his unvarnished character.

Lord Adrien stood from his chair and pointed a finger at me. "I won't allow it! Do you hear me? Never! My brother deserves only the best! A lady who can offer him the respect he deserves! I cannot permit a woman as homely and demented as this to become my sister-in-law!"

Lord Simeon glared at him sternly. "I'd prefer it if you didn't make me tell you again, Adrien."

"And you, brother! Please, wake up! You could have any beauty or wit you wished for! How could you possibly choose her?"

Lord Simeon cut down his brother's protestations with a voice as frigid as a blizzard. "I don't recall asking for your opinion. I will choose my own spouse, thank you very much. You have no right to make demands."

Lord Adrien staggered backwards with the shock of this flat dismissal. "S...Simeon..." His pale brown eyes shimmered—and then this twenty-four-year-old man began to bawl. He shrieked desperately, "Even so, I'm...I'm against it! Against it!"

Lord Simeon sighed. Nestled in the comfort of his arms, I let my pen race across the pages of my notebook. *A younger brother who adores his older*

brother... That could be a delicious plot device. The obstacle to the romance needn't necessarily be a woman.

“Are you even listening!? I'll tell Mother and Father just how unhinged you are and make them rescind their approval! For now you can pretend it's all well and good, but don't expect that to last! And your cat keeps trying to scratch me, so kindly do something about it!”

Assertive and full of spirit, and yet still he has the tendency to be a tormented victim. What a character type!

I was fangirling so hard.

Chapter Four

Spring is a season of social occasions, always including a great number of wedding ceremonies. First on the list this year was the marriage of the second son of Earl Celiere.

He was close in age to Lord Simeon and was part of his social circle, and in such cases it was customary to bring one's spouse or fiancé as well, so Lord Simeon and I attended the wedding reception together.

The family had fully reserved the gardens at Fleur et Papillon, a venue popular for social gatherings even amongst wealthy commoners. The flowers were not yet in full bloom, but thankfully there was no more than a light breeze, and the sun shone warmly on the festivities. The grass was a soft shade of green—enough to reassure me that we had indeed reached the time of year for outdoor enjoyment.

Wishing to wear an outfit bright enough for such a happy occasion, I opted for a yellow-green dress decorated with a white lace collar and dainty ribbons. I tied my hair with a matching ribbon as well. My mundane brown hair had the hidden benefit of matching easily with any color.

I'm getting awfully used to being the Lucifer of Lies. Even Lord Simeon didn't look at me sullenly today. Though I must say, he also didn't pay me any effusive compliments.

The other guests were fabulously attired as well. Seeing the many brightly colored spring dresses made me feel more florid and bright by association. Equally, I noted a number of military uniforms. Upon asking, I learned that the father of the bride was a member of the navy. The dress uniforms of the Royal Order of Knights were white and gold, but his was blue, as was standard in the navy. His epaulettes had gold braiding, and a number of medals shone proudly on his sash.

Baron and Baroness Bellecour were also present. When I surreptitiously asked Lord Simeon, it turned out they also had a connection to the bride. Baroness

Bellecour was her aunt.

Immediately I remembered the beauty in men's clothing I'd met the other day. I'd encountered Lady Rose only once since then, and it had been brief indeed—a mere exchange of cursory greetings in passing. I had gone to visit House Flaubert, and she had been leaving via the gate at the same moment I arrived. We had nodded to each other from inside our respective carriages, and that was that. It wasn't yet warm enough to open the windows while in motion, so we hadn't spoken at all.

I had wondered about the nature of her visit. *Perhaps she was just coming to say a proper hello, as there hadn't been much chance to talk at the port. But why would she visit on the same day that I had been invited?*

Slightly suspicious, I had asked Lord Simeon, who had said it was simply a brief and unplanned visit. They had spoken for a very short amount of time, and then she had gone straight home.

That in itself felt rather odd, however. After so long apart, wouldn't it have been better to make a real appointment so there would be enough time to sit and chat? Or had she intended to stay for longer, and only left in a hurry after hearing that I was coming?

Lord Simeon didn't seem perturbed at all. It was probably nothing. And yet, somehow, I was still left with an uneasy feeling.

When I glanced around from where I stood, Lady Rose did not appear to be anywhere nearby. She had spoken as though she had already cut all ties to her family, so I decided it was better not to ask the baron and baroness about her.

We promptly went over to congratulate the bride and groom. When Lord Simeon introduced himself, the bride's eyes lit up as soon as she heard his title.

"My goodness, you belong to the Royal Order of Knights? And you're the Vice Captain, no less? How marvelous! A true nobleman indeed! A man of the military, yet so wonderfully elegant—nothing like any of my father's men. I wish my father was a royal guard as well. Then perhaps I might have met you sooner, Lord Simeon."

Even for an amiable compliment it felt a tad too enthusiastic. *Is that really an*

acceptable way to behave in front of her new husband? It was their business, not mine, but I felt a tiny bit worried for them.

The groom was smiling awkwardly, albeit in a manner that suggested he wasn't particularly bothered, so there was probably no cause for concern. *I suppose it is his long-awaited wedding day. He wouldn't want to let his good mood be spoiled.* I hoped this couple wouldn't be facing a crisis so soon after their nuptials.

Lord Simeon, unflappable as always, managed to accept and move on from her compliment without any disturbance to the good cheer of the day. Other guests were moving and mingling around us, so I took another moment to glance around for Lady Rose. I still did not see her anywhere nearby, so I asked Lord Simeon if he'd mind me going for a walk around the venue.

"Shall I come with you?" he replied.

"No, I'll be all right on my own. I just want to take a quick look around, that's all."

He no doubt thought it was nothing more than my typical information gathering. With a hint of a wry smile, he gave his approval. "Don't wander too far off. If anything happens, I'd like to be able to reach you quickly."

"Understood!" Dutifully agreeing to his overprotective warning, I left on my own.

The gardens certainly are vast, I thought as I walked. You could hold a much larger-scale party here than this. If I hid behind those plants over in the distance, I doubt anyone would notice me.

But only half of the area was currently occupied by people. Rather than walking around the gardens, the guests seemed to prefer standing in tight clusters and engaging in conversation with one another.

I retrieved my glasses from my handbag and put them on. It was a relief to see the world with such clarity. I strolled along at a leisurely pace, enjoying the scenery.

Here and there stood young men and women in mixed pairs, enjoying a pleasant chat. For anyone who hadn't found a spouse yet, gatherings like this

were a golden opportunity. Those deciding on the guest list invariably kept that in mind as well, and tried to afford as many young people as possible the chance to attend and meet one another. As I searched for Lady Rose, I drew closer to a corner where a number of young ladies were talking in a small group. I listened in on their conversation while pretending I was there purely to take a few items of food from the table nearby. I could have guessed from the tone of their voices, but listening properly, it became clear that they were engaging in a spot of vicious rumormongering.

“Did you see what happened just now? The heir to an earldom appeared, and she made a face as though she was bitterly disappointed in her own husband.”

“She was so proud of having caught a nobleman, but perhaps when a higher ranking one appeared, she decided she might have committed too soon?”

They let out stifled giggles. It seemed they had witnessed the scene between the bride and Lord Simeon.

“Her obsession with nobility is quite remarkable. I remember she always affected the air of being a noblewoman herself because her aunt was married to a baron, but obviously no one was ever going to see her in that light. It bothered her so much, and she spoke with such zeal about how she would definitely marry into the nobility. I suppose she did manage it in the end, so all credit to her.”

“But even her aunt’s husband wasn’t a baron originally, I understand. The first son passed away, and then the barony was handed down to the second son—the uncle, in other words. That’s what I heard, at any rate.”

“The bride is hoping for the same thing, I’m sure. She seems to virtually be praying for her new husband’s older brother to suffer an untimely death.”

“Surely she won’t poison him or some such.”

“Ooh, the very thought of it!”

Even on such a joyous day, they did not conceal their claws. These girls were supposedly friends of the bride, although, listening to their words, that description hardly seemed appropriate. At the least, they were definitely guests on the bride’s side. Evidently they felt they were far enough away from the

people concerned that they could assume no one would hear them despite making no attempt to hush their voices.

“I suppose there is a vast difference in how a first son and second son are treated. Frankly, I feel sorry for the couple, enduring such a miserly wedding reception.”

“I quite agree. This is a venue even commoners can afford. And if they insist on holding it outside, I should think they’d at least wait until the flowers are in full bloom. The flower beds here are still a sorry sight indeed. I’m sure they only booked this place as a penny-pinching exercise.”

Really? I think it’s a perfectly lovely venue. There were all sorts of reasons why they might have held it here, and so early in the season. Perhaps there were so many bookings already that no other days were available, or perhaps they were eager to introduce themselves as man and wife before any other couples this year. Besides, Earl Celiere was not known for being stingy.

I had hoped to overhear some information about House Bellecour, but these girls didn’t seem to know anything on that front. Their discussion moved on from the bride to the young men present who had drawn their eyes. I decided that even if I did stay and listen, it wouldn’t be an especially fruitful harvest. *But before I go, I’ll have one of these delicious-looking fruit tarts.*

At the exact moment I ate one of the bite-sized tarts, I heard a “Miss Marielle!” from behind—and almost choked. I lifted a glass of lemonade from the table and forcefully washed down the food lodged in my throat. *Ughhh, now my throat hurts.*

“Oh dear! Are you all right?” said the man.

“Yes,” I stammered in reply. “My apologies that you had to witness such an unbecoming moment.” I turned around while surreptitiously wiping my mouth, and there stood a man with brown hair, dark eyes, and a surprised expression on his kind face. *How unexpected,* I thought, blinking. “Lord Francis. Good day to you.”

“Hello there. I’m sorry to have surprised you like that.”

“Oh, not at all. I didn’t know you would be attending today.”

I had not found Lady Rose, but Lord Francis instead. Lord Simeon had never mentioned that he would be here. “Are you part of the groom’s social circle as well, Lord Francis?”

“I am not. I suppose I might be considered to be a guest on the bride’s side. I don’t have any direct connection, but I know one of the other guests and came with him.”

It was an oft-heard tale: a guest bringing a young person with them so the latter would have a chance to meet potential partners.

“Though I fear I stick out like a sore thumb,” he continued.

“Oh, I’d hardly say that.”

Despite my effort to calm Lord Francis’s nerves, in truth he did appear somewhat out of place. The nearby group of girls took a fleeting glance our way, but immediately lost all interest in him and returned to their conversation. Lord Francis was, after all, quite plain. Although he had made himself presentable enough, his clothes did not look high class, but like those of an ordinary commoner. Rude though it might be to say so, if a man dressed like that without dashing good looks to make up for it, he was unlikely to attract the attention of any young ladies. Attending in such attire implied that perhaps Lord Francis himself had not mustered up much enthusiasm for the event.

“I see you’re wearing glasses today,” he said.

“Yes. My eyesight is actually rather bad, but they do clash somewhat if I’m wearing fine clothes.”

“Not at all, you look lovely today as well. But how come you’re on your own? Men who come to a place like this and see a lady of marriageable age aren’t likely to keep their distance. What’s Simeon doing, leaving his precious fiancée to fend for herself?”

“I decided to leave him behind for a moment. I had heard that today’s bride was related to House Bellecour, so I thought I’d look around to see if Lady Rose was here.”

“Ah... I must say, I haven’t seen her anywhere. I don’t believe she came.” Lord Francis said this casually enough that I wondered if he might know more about

the circumstances. Still, it was the answer I'd expected, and it came as something of a relief.

I was surprised at myself for feeling that way, and it made me aware that I hadn't been searching for Lady Rose because I wanted to see her, but because I wanted to be on guard against her getting too close to Lord Simeon.

It seemed the events of a few days prior were preying on my mind more than I had realized. But why? There was an endless parade of women trying to get close to him. This was hardly a new phenomenon. And yet, Lady Rose alone had provoked me to such a degree. *I suppose it is indeed because Lord Simeon himself showed affection for her?*

I didn't like this one bit. Was I really so jealous and petty?

As I stood there pondering, Lord Francis said, "Let's get you back to Simeon. You can never be sure there won't be people who act without restraint because they think there are no prying eyes."

He glanced around as if nonchalantly keeping an eye on the surroundings, and I realized there were a number of young men nearby. From their eager glances, the group of chatting young ladies had become aware of the men as well. Feeling that it would be better to leave it to them, I left with Lord Francis.

"Adrien didn't come?" he asked on the way.

"I have the impression that he wanted to," I replied. "Lord Simeon said that he left him behind because he'd only be a nuisance."

"Simeon is being rather harsh, as always. Still, what else can you do about someone who follows his older brother around when he should be old enough to know better."

Lord Francis smiled with the affection you'd expect of someone discussing his childhood friend. I wondered if he would know more about the relationship between Lord Simeon and Lady Rose...but I supposed that even if I asked, he wouldn't give a proper answer. No one with any common sense would talk about a man's old flames in front of his fiancée, and Lord Francis didn't seem the type to gossip so inconsiderately.

Asking Lord Simeon would be the quickest route, and provide far more

certainty. Even if it bothered him, he would most certainly give me a direct answer. Still, even knowing that, I couldn't work up the courage to ask him. I didn't want to bother him, and I didn't want him to start thinking of me as a troublesome woman. But above all, I was scared to hear it from his own lips.

He's a full-grown man, twenty-seven years old, so it wouldn't be the slightest bit odd for him to have had all sorts of experiences in his past. It's a mistake to start worrying about that. There are other men who proudly boast of their many conquests, and I've gleefully used that as source material in the past. So why then, when it came to Lady Rose, did I find myself cowering like this?

You're Agnès Vivier, I thought to myself. A romance author! Isn't this a little pathetic? Aren't you meant to be the one who knows everything about the delicate inner workings of romance between men and women?

I dearly wished I could fangirl over the situation, just as I usually would, and simply think, *This will make excellent source material, too!*

When we reached the spot I'd left earlier, the bride and groom were already gone. I supposed the happy couple were busy being congratulated by other guests. Lord Simeon, meanwhile, stood surrounded by a crowd of young ladies.

How come I can look at THIS scene and be completely fine with it?

"Simeon," Francis began in a jovial tone, "you do realize that if you start playing around with other women, this one will be snapped up by another man."

Lord Simeon turned around. The picture-perfect smile on his face turned to a look of surprise when he saw Lord Francis standing there. "Francis. I hadn't realized we'd be seeing you here."

"Yes, an acquaintance brought me along."

Lord Simeon turned to me, and his rigid expression softened again. "Hmm, it's unusually soon for you to be back. Have you finished already?"

"Yes. I bumped into Lord Francis while I was over there."

I moved closer to Lord Simeon, and he wrapped an arm around me and drew me closer still. *Dear oh dear, these young ladies are looking at me with*

terrifying eyes indeed. He held me with such passion that it almost felt like he was pleading for my help. *Ladies, I understand that he's the most exceptional gentleman in society and a cut above all the rest, but you know he's off the market. Can't you simply admit defeat?* I hadn't experienced this atmosphere for a while, so it felt somewhat nostalgic. Directly after we got engaged I'd received plenty of glares and accusations, so none of it shook me.

Smiling buoyantly, I nestled up against Lord Simeon. The girls opened their mouths as if to say something, but before they could speak, a deep voice interrupted. "Well, aren't you looking fancy today?"

An older man in a military uniform, probably in his forties, stopped as he passed by. His reddish brown hair and mustache stood out strikingly. *Hold on... Haven't I seen that mustache somewhere before?*

"I see you've had your fill of this crowd of women, Vice Captain Flaubert."

"Good day, Commander Kastner." Lord Simeon greeted the red-mustached man as though he was an acquaintance.

I see, so that rank insignia is that of a naval commander.

The red-mustached commander looked at Lord Simeon with a scornful gaze. He snorted and then said haughtily, "Good day, was that? Heh, courteous to a fault, as ever. The lad from the royal guards, so posh and cultivated. It's only fitting to see you exploiting that to draw in a crowd of fawning ladies, as though you're some handsome ladykiller."

Such naked hostility out of nowhere. It left me rather surprised—he'd made remarkably little attempt at concealing the barbed nature of his words. *Don't talk about Lord Simeon as though he's desperate for women's attention! It's they themselves who won't leave him alone. And what's this nonsense about "as though" he's handsome? He's incredibly handsome!*

Lord Simeon remained composed. This degree of provocation wasn't enough to raise his ire. "Apologies for not realizing you were in attendance today. I suppose you're acquainted with the father of the bride?"

"Naturally. We're both men of the navy. There are rather a lot of us here, if you hadn't noticed. I see even you didn't have the guts to wear your royal

guard's uniform in a place like this, Vice Captain Flaubert." The commander let out a raucous laugh. "Still, we're all grown-ups here. We won't gang up and start bullying you. Feel free to lord it up here to your heart's content. I'm sure it feels good. Enjoy that feeling while you still can."

Having said his piece, the commander walked off without waiting even a moment for Lord Simeon to reply.

The surrounding girls raised their voices in disgust. "Who was that? What an odious man!" "He's only jealous because you're so dashing, Lord Simeon. How thoroughly idiotic for a man of his age to be so hostile!" "Forget all about him, Lord Simeon!"

I looked up at his face. He was watching the commander walk into the distance, and didn't look especially hurt or offended. Rather, he seemed lost in thought.

"Lord Simeon, Lord Francis, I'm feeling a tad cold. It seems that hot drinks are available over there. Why don't we go and have a look?"

Lord Simeon quickly returned his attention to me, but it was Lord Francis who expressed agreement first. "Th-that sounds good," he stammered. "Indeed, why don't we sit down for a moment?"

I placed my arm in Lord Simeon's. The smile appeared on his face again, and he nodded. "Yes, that sounds like a fine idea. If you'll excuse us."

He turned his back on the surrounding girls without waiting for a reply. If he ill-advisedly paid them too much mind, they would have followed him around forever, so he brushed them off with a degree of vehemence that was rare for him. Sensing the cutting glares on our backs, we made our way to the conservatory in one corner of the garden.

This building had been constructed not so much for the benefit of the plants inside it, which amounted to little more than a few decorative pots dotted about here and there, but to allow people to enjoy a view of the outdoors even during the colder months. The three of us sat at one of the many benches placed throughout the room, and the two men drank tea while I enjoyed a mug of hot chocolate.

As soon as we were comfortable, I voiced the matter that was preying on my mind. “That man just now... Commander Kastner, was it? His parting words certainly seemed to carry some grim implications. What did he mean by ‘while you still can’?”

“Indeed. But if he meant anything specific, I certainly don’t have any idea what it was. No need to worry.” Perhaps in an effort to reassure me, Lord Simeon adopted a tone that suggested there was absolutely nothing to it.

“But how can one help worrying?” I replied. “It was a worrying scene, on the whole. Don’t you agree, Lord Francis?”

“Y-yes... Yes, I suppose so.”

Lord Francis seemed somehow uncomfortable, and his face had turned a funny color. He kept glancing outside at the garden beyond the glass. *Could that mustached commander be the one who brought Lord Francis along today?* If so, I wondered what connection the two of them had.

That would put him in quite a predicament—he’d be caught between a rock and a hard place, as it were—so I decided not to press him further.

Instead, I asked Lord Simeon again. “He looked at you with quite some animosity. Did something happen between you?”

“Nothing worth mentioning. He just hates me, as simple as that.”

I blinked. “He hates you? For what reason?”

Because Lord Simeon was a nobleman? Because he was so handsome? Because he was so popular with the opposite sex? It would be bad enough for a young man to be genuinely worked up over such trifling matters, but a man of the commander’s age? It seemed inconceivable.

With a half-smile, Lord Simeon replied, “The Royal Order of Knights isn’t particularly well-liked by the other military branches. In particular, the men of the navy have rather strong feelings on the matter. Because our recruiting practices take such things as social status, family pedigree, and physical appearance into consideration, there are many who believe that for us, genuine military skill plays second fiddle to serving as ornaments for the palace. I’ve no doubt I’m quite a symbol for that viewpoint.”

“How curious. I’ve never heard that before.”

The royal guards—who were trusted to work in very close proximity to the royal family—were the target of a great deal of envy, to be sure. And the names most commonly associated with the order’s current roster were those of Captain Poisson and Lord Simeon. Where the captain was the trusted confidant of His Majesty the King, Lord Simeon enjoyed the same privilege of His Highness the Crown Prince. It gave my fiancé a peerlessly high status in addition to his dashing good looks. The only ones who looked at him with innocent eyes, yearning to be with him, were young ladies. There was no lack of people who saw him through an entirely different lens.

“That commander, especially, is well known for his dislike of the royal guards,” Lord Simeon added. “He’s quarreled with us on a number of occasions. That’s all it was.”

“But doesn’t it feel premature to say that’s all it was? His last words were rather unsettling.”

“I expect he believes the navy will increase in influence and topple the royal guards from their position before too long. They have become rather more active lately.”

I recalled something with a flash. I clapped my hands together. “Oh yes, they conducted that highly visible roundup of illegal immigrants and intermediaries the other day! I thought it was odd at the time, because shouldn’t it be the police’s jurisdiction? But could that have been the reason, perhaps?”

“The commotion you happened upon a few days ago? Well, if the navy didn’t catch them when they were entering the country, it is the navy’s oversight. They were probably trying to win back points they’d lost by letting them enter the country to begin with. The police also aren’t capable of such a strong show of force by comparison.”

I nodded, mostly to myself. As a show of force, it had been entirely excessive, but their behavior certainly did seem consistent with Lord Simeon’s words. “It was quite a thing to witness,” I replied. “Even if they were illegal immigrants, I don’t see how it justified such ruthless use of violence against unarmed people.”

“The navy is known for its brutal tendencies,” Lord Simeon replied.

“There was a small child there! And yet...oh! *Oh!*” I exclaimed so loudly that both men reacted with shock.

“What’s the matter?” asked Lord Simeon.

“Oh, nothing... I just realized something, that’s all. Nothing important.” I chuckled as an attempt at distraction, then lifted my hot chocolate to my lips to hide from Lord Simeon’s suspicious gaze.

I had just remembered. That red-mustached captain had been present at the crackdown in the city. He was the very same awful man who had been about to hit a child, and had mercilessly flung me to the ground when I tried to intervene.

I was left with a bruise after that experience, but for the people he’d struck with his baton, I had no doubt it hurt far more. Thinking about it made me quite angry. *Yes. He was the one.*

The illegal immigrants had clearly committed a crime, so it wasn’t as though they weren’t at fault. Even so, I truly felt that the navy’s actions, and his in particular, had been far in excess of what was appropriate. As I took this into account together with his unpleasant attitude from minutes earlier, my opinion of Commander Kastner sank steadily lower.

“That reminds me,” said Lord Simeon, his voice deepening slightly and gaining a faint hint of an icy chill. “I never did ask you properly about that.”

Oh no, this is quite a pickle. I thought I’d escaped his questioning, but now I’d stirred the hornet’s nest by bringing it up.

“It’s just as I said at the time. I happened to be passing by when the situation erupted. It was all too violent for me, so I froze in horror and watched for a moment...and then...I had a bit of a tumble, that’s all.”

“You seem to have left out a few details before ‘I had a bit of a tumble.’”

The Demon Vice Captain’s questioning was unrelenting indeed. He wouldn’t overlook any attempts at obscuring the truth.

Ugh, the chills I’m feeling are simply magnificent! But I can’t let myself lose

this battle. I couldn't bear another lecture.

I responded as nonchalantly as I could manage, hiding my cold sweat. “Well, I suppose I did forget about a minor detail. Those around me were equally shocked, and I was jostled about quite roughly.” I decided it might be effective to subtly change the subject. “Speaking of which, while I’ve no doubt the roundup was necessary, it was quite a nuisance as well. Could they not have carried it out more peacefully? And the southerners... Why would they go to all the trouble of immigrating illegally, putting themselves at risk, when they could focus their efforts on working in their countries of origin? Even if they do escape this sort of crackdown, it must be a very harsh life they end up living, since they can never be legally employed. There must be jobs in their countries, surely? Shulk is a major power, and Gandia and Sulush trade with us, for example. It seems as though it would be better for them to have legitimate jobs in a place where they can maintain their status in society.”

In my effort to distract with smoke and mirrors, I had ended up expounding the thoughts I had held all along. I was interrupted, however, by Lord Francis vigorously lowering his cup of tea onto the table. The resounding *thud* made me close my mouth.

Lord Francis stared at his hands. Had my words rubbed him the wrong way, perhaps? I suddenly felt quite flustered, wondering if I’d said something wrong.

Lord Simeon looked at Lord Francis, then quietly said, “If everyone was able to do that, then no one would intentionally leave their own country to work in a far distant land. Their backgrounds give them no choice. Gandia and Sulush are poor countries. The number of jobs available is pitiful relative to their populations, which leaves a great number of their citizens without work. You mentioned their trade with Lagrange, but that trade is not conducted on a fair basis. Ultimately, many of those who do have employment have very low incomes.”

“Their trade with us isn’t fair?” I asked.

“Gandia may be officially independent, for example, but its position relative to Lagrange is still very weak. Lagrange holds all the power in the relationship. We are not trading with them on even footing. Furthermore, the majority of the

profits are hoarded by a small portion of the population and never find their way back to the workers. When life in their home countries is so difficult, it's no wonder they start to think that perhaps it might be better to be earning a foreign currency."

"Oh, I see." I was quite shocked hearing about conditions in the southern lands for the first time. I didn't know much about those countries—phrases like "former colony" were the extent of my awareness—but it seemed that life there was actually quite a struggle. "I had no idea. I suppose my words just now were quite arrogant and presumptuous."

I felt ashamed of what I'd said, quite honestly. They were self-righteous remarks about people whose difficult lives I knew nothing about.

"You didn't exactly say anything wrong," said Lord Francis kindly, lifting his head at last. "Illegal labor is a crime. It shouldn't be allowed simply because their lives are hard. Also, those who come here aren't only the ones who intend to earn an honest living. Plenty of them arrive with the express goal of committing thefts and muggings—of doing harm to Lagrange. So a crackdown like that is a matter of course." Having finished his effort to console me, he next turned to face Lord Simeon. "And you're still as dull and obstinate a man as ever. Why make a lady of the nobility listen to you talk about a topic like this?"

"Marielle has the ears to listen to such things and the head to understand them."

Lord Simeon's answer may have been blunt, but I was glad of it. It felt like a proper acknowledgment of me. There were plenty of men who believed that women wouldn't understand complex topics and refused to ever think otherwise.

In fact, the prevailing mindset was that women should remain silent on subjects like politics and economics. Women who had an interest in such topics were said to be unladylike and unappealing, and were not well liked. But Lord Simeon was different. He let me hear all of this, in full confidence that I would understand it. That made me very happy indeed.

My newfound good humor was evident on my face, and as a result, Lord Francis looked at me, apparently quite mystified. He then glanced at Lord

Simeon, whose expression struck a stark contrast to mine. Lord Francis chuckled awkwardly. “I’m somewhat lost, but is it possible I’ve said something to offend you?”

“No, I wouldn’t say so.” Creases formed on Lord Simeon’s brow. *Offended? Not at all! This is Lord Simeon’s bashful expression! He’s hiding his embarrassment!*

I stared at Lord Francis with a look that I hoped communicated all this, and he shrewdly gained a sense of what was going on. “You really are head over heels, aren’t you, Simeon? Was her intelligence what drew you to her? That would make her a fine match for you indeed. How happy you are...” Those last words trailed off, almost muttered to himself.

Lord Simeon coughed once to clear his throat and then replied with a question. “And how are things looking for you on that front? No luck finding anyone suitable down there in Gandia?”

“Sadly, not all of us enjoy such surefire success with the ladies as you do. For the time being, my younger sister’s wedding preparations are taking priority for me. I have to take charge of it all in place of our deceased father.”

“She’s due to be married? Congratulations.”

“Thank you. He’s just an ordinary fellow with no particular status or fortune, but what matters is that she’s happy, I suppose.” As he said this, Lord Francis wore a gentle expression filled with love. I could tell that his sister was very precious to him. *What a fine older brother.* I wondered if my own brother felt that sort of affection toward me. We got on well enough, but we both had a tendency to be immersed in our own respective hobbies and interests, so we didn’t talk to one another all that much.

Lord Simeon gazed at Lord Francis intently, focusing on him as though something had occurred to him as well.

We reached the end of the wedding reception without further incident. Commander Kastner didn’t attempt to pick a fight again, and the other guests all maintained a perfectly friendly manner, so nothing happened to disrupt the happy occasion.

After we parted ways with Lord Francis and were safely inside our own carriage, I tried asking Lord Simeon about his childhood friend. “Lord Francis is a rather curious person. He’s related to a viscount, so he must have been raised as a nobleman, yes? But he doesn’t come across that way at all. He even said himself that there was a difference in rank between your family and his. And yet, the two of you were childhood friends, were you not?”

Lord Simeon had said so, which meant it must be true. Still, I sensed some measure of awkwardness between them.

Lord Simeon did not answer immediately, but rather appeared to be pondering.

I hurriedly added, “Apologies. If it’s difficult to talk about, then don’t feel as though you need to.”

“It’s not so much that as... Well, it’s related to something quite personal to Francis, you see. I’m debating whether it’s my place to bring it up so freely. In the end, though, it’s the sort of thing you might hear through the grapevine anyway, so I’ll tell you. I know you well enough that I’m not worried you’d be prejudiced.”

“Is it something to do with his background? Some complicated circumstances?”

Lord Simeon nodded, then reached an arm out to embrace me and draw me close. I leaned against his body and felt his warmth as he spoke.

“His father was the son of a viscount, but his mother was not a noblewoman. And...she was not Lagrangian, but Gandian.”

I blinked. That really was quite unexpected. Southern people have darker skin, and their hair and eyes are black as well. They also have different facial features compared to northern people. Lord Francis did admittedly have very dark eyes, and his hair was a dark shade as well, but there were plenty of Lagrangians with similar features—even the royal family, for example. With his skin color and facial features, he could easily pass as a full-blooded northerner.

“Oh, really? I wouldn’t have guessed that at all.”

“Indeed, it seems his father’s blood had a stronger influence on his

appearance. His younger sister, on the other hand, has far more visible southern characteristics. His mother stood out as well, of course, being a native-born Gandian. The less affluent parts of the city have all sorts of people living side by side, but in the middle class and above, it's quite uncommon to see any other ethnic groups. That's no surprise given how deeply rooted the discriminatory attitudes are. If she had been from Shulk, at least one could have said she was from a powerful country, but Gandia only became independent recently, so it's very rare for Gandia to be seen as a country on equal footing with Lagrange. And of course, when adults set a bad example, their children are sure to follow it. Francis was subjected to a great deal of bullying."

Though his arm was embracing me, Lord Simeon's eyes were staring into the distant past. I began to feel melancholy, and drew my cheek up to his chest.

"Most of his father's family cut off all contact as well. This despite the fact that his father was a respectable government worker and shouldn't have been looked down upon by anyone. Seeing such contempt and narrow-mindedness from his fellow Lagrangians must have been very unpleasant for young Francis as well."

"But you rejected all that and made friends with Lord Francis, isn't that right? I'm sure you've been fair and impartial ever since you were a child."

"I wouldn't say that." He let out a sharp puff of air, and turned to me with a faintly bitter smile. "I'm not sure that I was such a respectable person at all, quite honestly. I have no certainty of that. It feels more as though, after being told over and over by my grandfather that I should be righteous, be tolerant, be just and impartial, I began simply repeating the words without properly understanding what they meant. I was a child, treating tolerance as something I could brandish to show how right and proper I was, so that I could bask in the feeling of my own self-satisfaction."

"But surely..."

Knowing Lord Simeon as he was now, I could have believed confidently, without a shadow of a doubt, that even as a child he had been the same strong and honest person he was now—and yet, his own evaluation of himself was surprisingly low. If I thought back on my own childhood I definitely had more

than a few embarrassing memories, but realizing that Lord Simeon had such memories too left my heart aching. It was somehow so adorable. Imagining Lord Simeon, young and not yet fully developed, made my face start to burn.

“But surely,” I repeated after a moment, “that’s relatively normal for a child? It’s not as though you actually did anything wrong. Quite the opposite, in fact. It’s still a positive result, isn’t it?”

“I’m not so sure,” he replied, smiling bashfully. *Good heavens, this seldom-seen vulnerable expression is too sweet for words. The mask of the ever-alert black-hearted military officer slips off to reveal the awkward innocence underneath! That sharp contrast gives me life!*

As my heart raced faster and faster, Lord Simeon’s eyes narrowed. “Marielle?”

Oops. Honestly, I wasn’t thinking anything too untoward. It was simply one more reason to fangirl over him. *Yes! I can fangirl over every single aspect of Lord Simeon!*

I smiled in an effort to gloss over my reaction. “But Lord Francis must have been happy to have a friend like you. Someone without prejudice, who befriended him regardless of all that.”

“It’s nice to think so, but...” Lord Simeon cocked his head, his expression somewhat weary. “I’m sure it angered and upset him that so many people bore him such ill will, but I imagine a hypocrite who befriended him purely to make a display of his own righteousness left an even worse taste in his mouth. There are times when I’ve really suspected he might hate me. I expect that’s why Francis made mention of our difference in rank and drew such a sharp line between us.”

I took a moment to silently consider Lord Francis’s words and facial expressions from the short time I’d known him. It was true that I’d sensed some awkwardness, but I didn’t have the feeling that he hated Lord Simeon.

Certainly, there might have been some complicated feelings that couldn’t be resolved with a few perfunctory words. Lord Francis’s background had given rise, on both their parts, to a degree of reserve and apprehension, perhaps even ill feeling between them. Even so, to this day they had remained in contact and

continued to see one another.

“And how do you feel, Lord Simeon? Do you dislike Lord Francis? Or do you like him?”

This time it was Lord Simeon’s turn to blink. “Asked so directly, I must say, I’m not sure. I definitely don’t hate him, of that much I’m sure.”

“But you don’t necessarily like him either?”

“I don’t think I’d put it that way. It’s more that...I have a great deal of respect for him.”

“Respect?”

Having the respect of Lord Simeon was impressive indeed. Did Lord Francis, a perfectly ordinary-seeming and somewhat timid young man, really have such outstanding qualities to justify that?

“I first met Francis via my grandfather. Francis’s father was in his social circle, and brought Francis with him when he visited my family one day. I think he must have been about eight or nine, but even then he was so quiet and mature. He was beset by inconsiderate comments from the adults around him, and was bullied by the children, so I recall that he often had a look of hurt on his face. Despite it all, he persevered and did his very best. He protected his sister and fought against the discrimination they both faced. I found that very admirable, and it gave me a lot of respect for him. I’m sure, though, that from Francis’s point of view, it was a rather blithe and thoughtless view of the situation.”

Lord Simeon’s smile felt rather masochistic, as though he was tormenting himself. I silently tilted my head. *If you judge every tiny detail like that and deny all the positives, then naturally, any and all feelings will become completely meaningless.* If he felt respect for Lord Francis, that meant he definitely had affection for him. Even worrying that his friend might hate him was clearly just the equal and opposite force of liking him. *So why not simply leave it at that?*

For Lord Francis, it must have been a lifeline for someone to treat him with such respect. Besides, if he really hated Lord Simeon, he wouldn’t have wanted to reunite with him upon returning to the country. He’d have made some excuse at the port so that he could leave early on his own. It wasn’t as though

he was especially close to Lord Adrien either, from what I could gather. Today, he'd even suggested going over to see Lord Simeon of his own volition. He certainly hadn't been forced to do it against his will.

It's all right, honestly. The two of you really are friends.

As I nestled against Lord Simeon, I caressed his back. This was no mere expression of fangirl frolicking, but rather an expression of the love in my heart for Lord Simeon. It was rare for him to show me this insecure side. Knowing that even he had such moments of self-doubt only increased my affection for him. Despite appearances, he was not perfect. He was human, and I loved him for it.

Lord Simeon, too, increased the pressure with which his arms embraced me. The mood between us became very pleasant indeed, and his face began to move just a smidgen closer toward mine...but alas, our time was up. The carriage was arriving at my family's house.

"Thank you for coming today," he said as the carriage pulled up. "I'm glad you did me the honor of joining me."

As usual, an overly formal and proper show of thanks from Lord Simeon.

"Not at all," I replied. "A day spent with you is a wonderful day indeed. And, of course, the bride was so pretty, and all the guests were dressed so beautifully. It was a feast for the eyes."

"I've no doubt. And you do always find a way to enjoy yourself, wherever you are and whatever the occasion." He smiled with a mysterious glint in his eye—a reaction that puzzled me, since how could any occasion fail to be enjoyable if I was together with Lord Simeon?

The carriage stopped and the door was opened. The servants, having heard us arrive, were already standing by in the doorway. Lord Simeon got out first and offered me his hand, which I took as I descended from the carriage.

When I then looked up at him, sad to be parting, I suddenly remembered something crucial. "Oh no!" I cried, almost screaming.

Lord Simeon was taken aback. "What's the matter?"

I balled my hand into a fist. "I meant to ask if we could take a detour on the

way back! I was so engrossed in our conversation that I quite forgot.”

“A detour? Did you have an errand to run?”

I nodded vigorously. This had been my chance! Lord Simeon had taken a full day out of his busy schedule and was spending it with me. To thoughtlessly squander the opportunity was more regrettable than words could describe!

“Lord Simeon, would you go into the city with me again soon? I’d like us both to go to the optician.”

“The optician?”

“Yes, I’m thinking of having a new pair of glasses made...and, well, I’d like to get a matching pair for you.”

“Oh.”

Lord Simeon’s face turned very serious. Fearing that I had immediately put him off the idea, I rushed to clarify. “I don’t mean matching in a visible manner! Nothing that would be obvious at first glance. I simply feel as though I’d like to wear glasses that have some elements in common with yours. Secretly...in places that don’t stand out too much.”

Was such an idea really so undesirable for him? Personally I didn’t think there was anything so odd about it. After all, we were having matching wedding rings made, weren’t we? It was essentially the same, but in the form of glasses! *Wait*, I thought suddenly, *does that make them wedding glasses? Can we only wear them after we’re married?*

My heart pounding, I looked to Lord Simeon for a response. After a moment’s heavy silence, he hid his mouth with a hand and looked slightly to the side.

“Yes, indeed. I will be busy for a short while, but as soon as I’m able to make time for it, we’ll go there.”

“Oh, thank you!”

I nodded with all my might at his bashful response. I didn’t know if the time would be in ten days, twenty days, or a month. Perhaps it would even be after our wedding day. Still, if he had promised it, I was willing to wait. I knew Lord Simeon would keep his word, so I didn’t have to worry.

He turned back to me as I beamed with good humor. For a moment he looked as though he wanted to say something. He hesitated, but ultimately didn't say whatever it was. He simply parted from me with a normal goodbye, then went home.

Perhaps he is somewhat put off by the idea after all? For a man, the idea of matching accessories might have been more embarrassing than exciting. I had no intention of making Lord Simeon lose face, though. We would choose the frames together, and have glasses made that he fully approved of.

With Lord Simeon gone, it was inevitable that I'd focus on my eagerness to see him again. I entered the house so full of merriment that I could almost break into dance. The servants looked at me with kind yet lukewarm expressions.

Another wonderful day had passed, and I believed unconditionally that, as usual, another good day awaited tomorrow. Even if Lord Simeon was so busy with work that we couldn't meet, he would definitely send a letter. Each day was a source of great excitement. And in just two months, we would be married. As my wedding day approached, I was filled with boundless joy.

And yet, a few days after that conversation, an event occurred that turned my happiness upside-down.

The one who informed me of it was my older brother. He returned home from work unusually early, and came straight to me, with a heavy expression that was quite unlike him.

"Marielle, I need you to listen to me. Lord Simeon...is being held under suspicion of breach of trust."

Chapter Five

I leapt out of my chair. “Leaking official secrets? Lord Simeon!? You can’t be serious!” The words had reached my ears, but I struggled to comprehend them.

As I leaned forward, my face came perilously close to that of His Highness, who sat across from me. The nearby royal guards reacted at once, but His Highness ordered them to stand down with a wave of his hand.

“Nothing is certain at this stage,” His Highness replied. “However, the suspicion is there, and we are investigating accordingly. That’s all.”

“That’s all? Even investigating it seems absurd! How could Lord Simeon be suspected of such a crime in the first place? It’s impossible, surely!” Though I tried to control my ill-mannered behavior, which was entirely inappropriate for an audience with the crown prince at the royal palace, I could not prevent my tone from growing stronger. How could I keep a level head in a situation that was so far beyond ridiculous, it beggared belief? My indignation and grief spilled from every word. “Your Highness, do you really believe Lord Simeon could be guilty of this?”

His Highness made a troubled face and sighed. “In my position, I don’t have the luxury of judging based on who I personally favor. If an accusation is put before me, accompanied by tangible evidence, I have no choice but to investigate.”

“I’m sure that’s the case, but—”

“For some time now, in fact, I’ve been aware that some underhanded treachery was going on. Information has been leaking that only a select few individuals were privy to. The details of unannounced political decisions and topics discussed only in closed-door meetings with other nations. If we consider who would know about matters involving all the different branches of government, it leaves us with relatively few suspects. Ministers, the prime minister...and the king and crown prince, and their close associates.”

“So you’re one of the suspects yourself, Your Highness.”

“Why would I be leaking official secrets!?” For a moment His Highness reacted to me with his usual feigned anger, but he quickly cleared his throat and told me to return to my seat.

Still dissatisfied, I sat. Tea and cakes had been placed before me, but I didn’t feel like partaking of them.

“You say there are relatively few suspects, but it actually adds up to a rather large number of people, doesn’t it? Why is Lord Simeon the only one under suspicion?”

“He isn’t. However, he is the lead suspect at the present moment.”

“But there’s nothing suspicious about him! The entire world could turn upside-down and that would still hold true. You surely know it’s impossible that Lord Simeon of all people would throw away his loyalty to you and commit such an act of betrayal.”

“I’m afraid an argument like that, based purely on sentimentality, will not win anyone over. He was caught having direct contact with a spy that we’ve been tracking, and evidence was found in his own home—certain documents that indicate his involvement. Disproving the accusation would require undeniable proof of his innocence.”

“But...”

He’d essentially been caught in the act, and they’d secured evidence backing that up. What could possibly turn up that would clear him of suspicion now? Realizing that the situation was far more hopeless than I had imagined, I began to feel as if the floor was giving way beneath me.

And yet, I still couldn’t believe it. His contact with the spy had to be a coincidence, or some kind of misunderstanding. And those documents found in his home couldn’t have originated from Lord Simeon himself.

“What kind of documents are they?”

“Papers with all the information in question neatly summed up, and letters exchanged with Easdale about it. That kind.”

“So the information was leaked to Easdale...”

It was a country whose name I’d heard often lately. I furrowed my brow.

Easdale, the great power to the west. For countless years, the ties of fate between our country and theirs had been deep and significant. The two countries had been at war many times—but at the same time, the royal families of the two lands had intermarried on several occasions. There had even been a case where the king of one and queen of the other had married and ruled jointly. As eras came and went, we were enemies or allies. Right now we were on friendly terms, more or less, but we still had plenty of quarrels and strife. It was a relationship that came with its fair share of caution and a need to continually keep Easdale contained.

The engagement of His Highness’s sister, Princess Henriette, to the crown prince of the Grand Duchy of Lavia was also tied in with these difficulties. Lagrange and Easdale only shared part of their respective borders with one another—the rest was taken up by Lavia, which was sandwiched in between. Lavia had, for many years, been in the unfavorable position of having to decide which of the two nations to align with. Recently, a marriage proposal had finally been agreed upon, and Lagrange now stood at a slight advantage. However, this was not a decisive difference, and Easdale was no doubt forming a plan to rebound from this defeat.

Though Easdale had of course sent spies to Lagrange, as His Highness had hinted, this applied in the opposite direction as well—we had spies of our own planted in Easdale. There was also an intelligence operative from Lavia floating around, disguising himself as a thief.

I imagined that the existence of a betrayer, some sort of man on the inside, was not so uncommon either. Still, that didn’t mean I could accept that Lord Simeon might be such a man.

“And it really proves he’s colluding with them? It doesn’t just ambiguously hint at it?”

His Highness took on a stern tone and an expression to match. “Miss Marielle, though you are Simeon’s fiancée, you are still an outsider and an ordinary civilian with no involvement in the investigation. Don’t labor under the

misunderstanding that you can ask any question you like and expect it to be answered.”

A flat refusal. His easygoing attitude had been replaced by an uncompromising rigidity. I had more questions to ask, but I swallowed my words.

This was the first time His Highness had ever shown me a face like that. Perhaps, though, it was his true nature as the crown prince. No matter how much he complained, he had always indulged me, but that was when my behavior had not crossed the line into causing harm. Now I had transgressed that boundary, and he had made it clear that I couldn't be my usual demanding self. I hung my head.

“The reason I agreed to your request for a personal audience was to drive this point home. I've told you absolutely everything I can, so now you must wait patiently for the result of our investigation. Don't go scampering all over the place while Simeon isn't by your side. Is that clear?”

I continued to look at the floor.

“Miss Marielle.” He demanded an answer, his voice stern.

I lifted my head slightly. “I don't mind if it's only for a moment,” I said hesitantly, “but is there any way you could allow me to see Lord Simeon?”

I voiced this request with every intention that it would be the very last one...but it couldn't be granted after all. He silently shook his head, and I sighed. *Not such a great surprise, I suppose.* I'd never heard of an outside party being allowed to meet with someone being held under suspicion of a crime.

If I persisted, I'd only annoy His Highness and damage Lord Simeon's honor even further. Giving up hope, I stood. “I apologize for taking up so much of your time. I'm greatly appreciative that you explained the situation to me.” I curtsied deeply.

“I can imagine how you must be feeling, but for now, you must be patient and wait. Don't start concocting any problematic plans, and don't poke your nose into anything dangerous. Just behave sensibly. Understood?”

“Yes,” I replied, nodding obediently. He had spoken the words so strongly, I

couldn't react otherwise.

"It's an order from the crown prince. Once you've pledged your commitment to it, you cannot disobey."

"I understand. I swear on my father's honor, and Lord Simeon's." I nodded again for emphasis.

At last, his expression softened. "Good girl." He stood up and patted my head. Perhaps because he had younger sisters, His Highness occasionally treated me as though he was my older brother. Despite having spoken to me quite strictly a moment ago, his large hand was as gentle as ever.

On the inside, His Highness probably believes in Lord Simeon's innocence as well. That must be the real reason he agreed to meet with me. In all honesty, I had been prepared to be turned away at the door. Someone of my status would never normally dream of being granted a personal audience with His Highness the Crown Prince.

Because I was Lord Simeon's fiancée, I was being given special treatment. Though I'd taken advantage of that, he hadn't rebuked me for it beyond a handful of words, and had told me everything he could. He wouldn't have done something like that if he was truly convinced by this accusation. Accepting the true feelings His Highness wished to convey but couldn't express due to his position, I withdrew from his presence.

On my way out, I was accompanied by a royal guard, specifically Alain, a man with whom I'd become quite familiar by now. He was Lord Simeon's aide. Seeing how dejected I was, he offered encouragement. "Don't be too disheartened. We also think it's simply impossible."

"I'm glad to hear you say so."

"Everyone in the Royal Order of Knights believes that the Vice Captain is innocent. It's all right, I'm sure he'll be cleared of suspicion and released soon enough."

The conviction in his tone did lift my spirits somewhat, but then a voice interrupted, ruining this moment of sympathy I'd been so grateful for.

"Heh. Typical favoritism. Of course you believe the man in your own branch.

Go on, if he's so innocent, then prove it."

Surprised at the arrogant intrusion, we both turned around to see an older man wearing the insignia of an army brigadier. He had just entered the corridor, accompanied by several subordinates. He evidently knew the particulars of what was going on.

He looked at me. "So, you came here to moan to His Highness, did you? You need to learn your place. This is no business for women, with their lack of rational thought."

Alain and I stood lost for words as the brigadier made his cutting remarks.

"Sorry to have troubled you," I managed eventually.

"Women act purely based on emotions," he continued. "They don't have minds that can think rationally, and they have no understanding of reason or logic, so what's the point in talking to you about it? His Highness was far too naive in indulging you."

"He's still young, I suppose," interjected one of the brigadier's subordinates with a scornful laugh. *He's laughing not only at me, but at Prince Severin as well. Awfully courageous for a mere army major. I'll be sure to remember his face.*

"Naive! Yes, that's exactly the word for this situation. Frankly, if the army turned out to have a traitor like that, I'd die of embarrassment."

"It's more than a little annoying. This one royal guard's actions have stained the honor of the entire military."

For them, Lord Simeon's guilt was a foregone conclusion. I yearned to raise my objections, but I knew my words would fall on deaf ears. I surreptitiously took a deep breath and stopped myself from falling into disarray. Alain, too, was biting his lip and restraining himself.

The brigadier continued his tirade. "Giving a youngster like that such a high rank was a mistake to begin with. Hmph! A layabout like that who thinks he's so special because he's from an influential house and he was the crown prince's school chum? Vice Captain of an entire branch of the military? That sort of nepotism would never be tolerated outside of the royal guards. Simply

ludicrous. He has good looks, certainly, so I don't blame them for using him for decoration. But an ornament hardly needs a leadership role."

Is that supposed to be a description of Lord Simeon? The details did not match up in the slightest. Clearly, having heard that someone they already hated was accused of a crime, they were taking their chance to attack his character without reserve.

The royal guards provoked quite some antipathy in the other military branches, and there were also those who bore ill will toward Lord Simeon in particular. *It must be awkward having those sorts of enemies.*

"And on top of all that—"

"What is all this racket in the corridors of the palace?" said a new voice, interrupting the brigadier's ongoing rant in a listless yet somehow ice-cold tone.

The brigadier turned around. In an instant, his face went from a picture of rage to white as a sheet. He firmly closed his mouth. The man before him was of far, far higher rank.

"Your Grace!" he stammered to the duke.

"I say, you're being a tad menacing toward this young lady." His words were rather old fashioned, but in fact he was not nearly as old as they suggested. If I recalled correctly, he had recently turned thirty-four. His noble features and long black hair hinted at his royal blood.

The arrival of His Majesty the King's younger cousin, Duke Silvestre, drained the soldiers of all the vigor they'd displayed up to that point.

"No, well, you see," began the brigadier, "she'd appealed directly to His Highness —a highly presumptuous act for someone of her station —so we felt compelled to give her a light telling-off."

"I see." The duke turned to face me. His gray eyes took me in, and he let out a chortle. "She's still a child. Be lenient. You can't expect her not to be upset upon hearing that her fiancé has been taken into custody."

"Still, to cause His Highness such inconvenience..."

"His Highness decided to meet with her, and he's entitled to do so. It's not for

us to worry about.”

At being told this so bluntly, the brigadier stopped arguing, albeit with a look of dissatisfaction. No matter how much fault he found with me, he couldn't criticize the duke. He muttered something unintelligible and withdrew.

Duke Silvestre watched him go, his eyes cold, then walked over to me.

“Thank you,” I said.

“You’ve nothing to thank me for. I was sick of the ugly sound of his voice, that’s all.” As he spoke, he stood right in front of me and stared. *What could this be about? It’s not as though we’re really acquainted.* We had exchanged greetings on one occasion since Lord Simeon proposed to me, but aside from that, we had never had any opportunity to meet. It was a surprise that he even remembered who I was.

I attempted a reserved enquiry. “Your Grace?”

In response, the duke laughed softly. “You don’t have your notebook with you today?”

I blanched. “What?” I had never imagined he would say that.

Nor would I have imagined what came next. He reached out his hand and lifted up a wisp of my hair. The scent of jasmine wafting from his sleeve tickled my nose. I silently looked up at the duke, my field of vision filled with the hair slipping through his fingers. Finally, he stroked my cheek once, then turned his back. He left without another word, even to say goodbye, and both Alain and I watched him go in astonishment.

As if waking from a dream, as soon as the duke was out of earshot, Alain whispered, “What the devil was that all about?”

I cocked my head. “Who knows?”

Did the duke know that I spent my time looking for interesting reference material and writing it down? Had I been discovered by him, as I had been by Lord Simeon? The one time we had been introduced, nothing of the sort had come up in the conversation at all.

What is this strange feeling? Knowing that I had caught Duke Silvestre’s eye

should have been enough to make my heart race ever so slightly. Even if not to the same extent as Lord Simeon or His Highness, he was a perfectly handsome man and very popular with the ladies. And yet, the feeling he gave me—had always given me—was quite different. He had a strange and elusive quality that I couldn't quite put my finger on. This made him an ideal model for a character in a book, but I felt a certain reluctance to get too close to him, so I'd largely observed him from a safe distance. Even though he was of the same royal blood as Prince Severin, he gave off a completely different impression.

Despite having been rescued by him, I felt more bewildered than happy. I was left entirely ill at ease. It was exactly the sort of situation where I'd normally want to see Lord Simeon.

Sighing, I began to make my way outside. I wondered what Lord Simeon was doing at that moment. Knowing him, I doubted he would feel defeated merely because he was being held under suspicion of a crime. I was sure he was applying enough menacing pressure to the interrogators to make them recoil in fear. *Such a shame that I won't have a chance to witness that scene. I'm sure I would fangirl so very hard over it!*

And it would have been a reassuring sight, of course. Not being able to see him stirred up a great deal of uncertainty in me. Until the very moment I'd heard about them, these circumstances had been completely unimaginable to me. At first I didn't even understand what had happened. I felt as though Lord Simeon had disappeared from my life without warning, leaving me alone in the darkness.

But I felt determination rise in me. *Will I simply wait for him to come back to me? No! I, Marielle Clarac, will not give in to grief and lose all presence of mind. I vow that I will uncover the truth of this case and prove Lord Simeon's innocence! And then, he and I will stand before the altar together! Under no condition will I let this obstacle stand in my path when I'm so close to hearing the bells of joy. No one is going to ruin the life I've planned, full of fangirling and happiness!*

Hold on, Lord Simeon! I am coming to rescue you!

After leaving the palace, I went directly to the residence of House Flaubert. I

had been worried that Countess Estelle would be furious at this extraordinary calamity, or that she would have taken to bed due to the immense shock...but when I met her, she was not in any such state, but rather an exceedingly normal and nonchalant one.

“What on earth can have happened? How foolish of that boy, getting himself wrapped up in something so ridiculous.” The countess was in her salon surrounded by a few friends whom she had invited for tea. She looked as youthful and beautiful as always—not at all as though she had a son of almost thirty years old. “It was quite a to-do, I must say. The military police barged in out of nowhere and rummaged around all over the house. They even broke a vase of mine. It came from an eastern land, and was such a pretty color. I was quite fond of it. And they didn’t even apologize properly! It left me quite vexed!”

“Goodness, poor you,” said one of her friends.

Another chimed in with, “That sort of person usually has an inferiority complex when it comes to the nobility. Whenever they think they have a chance to take us down a peg, they go on the offensive.”

“That behavior is precisely what shows their inferiority,” said another.

The elegant ladies’ chatter seemed to come from an entirely different world than the one I had just witnessed at the palace. I grew quite confused, wondering if I’d been dreaming, or if in fact this was the dream?

This was a facade that the countess could surely only maintain because she had absolute confidence in her son, I decided. She was able to keep her composure because she truly believed there was nothing to worry about. It couldn’t be that she actually didn’t understand the gravity of the situation...could it?

The other ladies offered me some encouragement of their own. “Chin up, Marielle,” said one. “Lord Simeon will be back soon enough.”

“Indeed,” said another. “He’s an excellent man. I’d suggest leaving it all to him rather than getting overly worked up.”

Their ‘encouragement’ rang rather hollow. Though they had smiles on their

faces, they felt like the pale rays of sunlight that were slipping through the salon's window. There was no sense of warmth or an appropriate degree of urgency.

"That's quite right," interjected Countess Estelle. "My father-in-law raised him to repay what is dealt to him in spades, so you should leave Simeon's business in his own capable hands. More importantly, I cannot believe you're wearing a dress like that again. I ordered such a variety to be made for you by Madame Pelagie. Why aren't you wearing one of those?"

Countess Estelle's attention quickly moved on from the matter at hand to my clothing choices. At this rate I'd be trapped there for an eternity receiving all sorts of lectures about fashion. I hurriedly stood. "Apologies. I knew that I'd be rushing about here and there today, so I thought I'd wear an outfit I could easily move around in. Speaking of which, I'm concerned about how Lord Adrien is managing, so I'd like to see him while I'm here. If you'll excuse me."

"Yes, you're quite right. He is the one most upset about Simeon's absence. Perhaps you can cheer him up."

Countess Estelle generously let me go without trying to detain me any further. After saying a sufficiently polite goodbye to everyone present, I turned on my heel and escaped from the salon.

It is a sight to behold, the way the ladies of major houses react to a crisis like this. Perhaps I should learn from their example and not let every little thing disturb me. Perhaps I could take heart from Countess Estelle and her friends after all. Hearing that Lord Simeon had been taken into custody had left my nerves fraught, it was true, but they were right that there was no way he'd go down without a fight. I began to recover a bit of my usual positive attitude. I would do my best to solve the case myself, but I decided I wouldn't be too tormented about the whole affair. *It will be fine. I'm sure of it.*

I asked one of the servants to show me to Lord Adrien's room. She knocked at his door and received permission for me to enter, but when I did so, Lord Adrien was sunken into his chair and appeared unable to even lift his head.

"Good day, Lord Adrien. This all hit rather like a bolt from the blue, didn't it? Quite a surprise."

He didn't move at all in response to my greeting. His elbows rested in his lap and he was cradling his head in both hands. *I think I've seen a statue like this in a museum.*

I continued, "I went to see His Highness just now, and he told me what's going on. The more I hear about it, the more implausible the accusation seems. His Highness doesn't appear to believe it. Nor do the royal guards. I'm sure he'll be cleared of suspicion and released before too long."

I went out of my way to speak in a cheerful tone, but still received no reply. What had happened to all his vivacity from the other day? I'd expected to see him burning with rage, giving everyone around him a hard time and demanding that they all do something to prove Lord Simeon's innocence.

My neighbor's dog had become quiet and unresponsive like this once, and it had indicated that something was wrong with his health. The memory of that made me slightly worried. *Perhaps he's simply dozed off? That wouldn't be so bad.* I took the liberty of crouching down before him and peering up at his face from below.

Both his eyes were wide open and focused on his feet. He still didn't say a word, but he was awake.

Then I saw the steady stream of tears that dripped onto the carpet.

He's crying...

This was unexpected. I was lost as to what to do. What do you say to comfort a weeping twenty-four-year-old man?

I hesitated and then said, "Stay strong, Lord Adrien. Everything will be fine! It's the one and only Lord Simeon, after all. I'm sure that the ones interrogating him are more scared of him than he is of them. Don't you just wish you could see the face he's showing them right now? He's the Demon Vice Captain! Even in captivity, he won't lose his menacing gaze! It's an incredible sight, I've no doubt. How unfair that only the military police get to see it. Perhaps when he comes back he'll recreate it for us."

But even when I said something so over the top that it should surely have provoked his anger, he gave absolutely no answer.

My goodness. This must be an acute illness indeed.

As I considered my next move, a voice from behind me said, "It's no use, Miss Marielle. Best to just leave him be."

I turned. A boy with an angelic face, bright blue eyes, and pale blond hair that resembled Lord Simeon's had joined us in the room.

"Good day, Lord Noel."

In stark contrast to his older brother, the youngest of the three Flaubert siblings wore a radiant smile. "Good day. You went to the palace, I hear? What's the mood there?"

"Business as usual, for the most part. I was told that they have to investigate because the accusation has been made, but nothing is confirmed yet." I intentionally phrased my reply as lightly as I could. Lord Noel was still a boy, after all, and Lord Adrien was in no condition to hear anything too distressing. "His Highness can't show any favoritism due to his position, but that doesn't mean he actually doubts Lord Simeon. Your brother's subordinates all believe he's innocent as well."

"That makes sense, I suppose. Simeon plays everything by the book so stubbornly that they say he's made of stone. How could he not be trusted? He'd never leak official secrets." Lord Noel shrugged his shoulders casually. "When I heard about it, I wondered if they hadn't got the crime mixed up, and he'd actually committed something a bit more Simeonesque." For one moment, I got a glimpse at the devilish true face behind the angelic mask. The three boys of House Flaubert certainly were quite different from one another. A demon, an overgrown puppy, and a cute little devil.

"Exactly," I replied. "Which is why you needn't worry, Lord Adrien. Lord Simeon will be back before you know it."

Still nothing. I wondered what would work to cheer up a dispirited puppy. I sighed. "There must be something we can do."

"He was very animated at first," said Lord Noel. "When the military police came to investigate, Adrien practically jumped down their throats. Everyone fought to try and calm him down because they feared he'd be arrested too. But

then, all of a sudden...I think it was when the policemen started making a huge fuss about having found some evidence? He became entirely despondent, and he's been like this ever since."

"That evidence..." The documents that His Highness had mentioned. Papers with top-secret information, and letters exchanged with Easdale.

"...fault."

For the first time, a voice escaped from the large puppy crouched over in despair. I bent down and asked him to repeat himself.

"It's my fault," he said, as if the words were wrung from his throat.

I furrowed my brow. Why would it be Lord Adrien's fault? I looked at Lord Noel, but he, too, shook his head in confusion.

"Do you know something?" I asked.

Lord Adrien covered his face with his hands. "What those men found... The papers and letters they found that are evidence of breach of trust... I couldn't believe they would find anything like that, so I couldn't help looking to see where they'd come from...and they were in the document box I'd given him."

"Document box?" I replied.

Lord Noel explained, "A box made of rosewood that Adrien brought back as a souvenir for Simeon. It's practical but has artistic value as well, so it was an appropriate choice of gift on Adrien's part. Simeon was very pleased with it. It's exactly the sort of thing he likes."

"And the documents were all found in that box?"

"Yes. Apparently it had a false bottom that can be used to hide things. But Adrien had no idea about that, and he certainly didn't say anything about it when he gave it to Simeon."

"You didn't know?" I asked, looking at Lord Adrien.

He nodded, his shoulders trembling. He plunged both hands into his hair and grasped it tightly. "Not at all. I thought it was a normal box. It's not something you can tell just by looking at it. I wouldn't even know how to open it! Nor did the shopkeeper say anything about a false bottom when I bought it. How was I

to know it had a mechanism like that? Which means Simeon shouldn't have known about it either. How could he have hidden those documents inside it!?"

"But the documents did get in there somehow," I replied.

Silently, all his energy sapped, Lord Adrien hung his head.

But the situation was becoming clear to me. *It's all starting to make sense.*

I had been hoping to find out where exactly the evidence had been found. Even if they'd all been conveniently bundled up together in Lord Simeon's study, finding them there should have been anything but straightforward. The walls of the study were lined with so many built-in bookcases that it almost looked like a library. (Incidentally, House Flaubert did have its own library elsewhere in the house.) The writing desk was a custom-made piece with lots of drawers, and around it had been placed a number of shelves for storing documents as well. Lord Simeon did plenty of work after hours, so his study was home to mountainous piles of paperwork.

You'd expect it to have taken the military police a whole day to excavate that site, but based on what Countess Estelle said, they had quickly found what they were looking for, then withdrawn. It was far too surgical a strike, as though they already knew what they would find and where they would find it.

Which means they probably did know. Hearing about the false bottom mechanism in the box only confirmed it: this was all pre-arranged, and someone had set Lord Simeon up.

Immediately I started to turn incandescent with rage. The evidence being hidden in a box with a false bottom was a hackneyed plot device from a cheap mystery play, and whatever the circumstances, Lord Simeon would have known better than to leave anything lying around in easy reach that could serve as evidence against him. *How dare you mock my Demon Vice Captain like that!*

I regained my composure, then put my hands on my hips and took a deep breath. "Don't be such a coward, Adrien. You call yourself a man of House Flaubert? When someone springs such a despicable trap on you, it's pathetic to just sit there stricken with grief. If you get hit, you have to strike back! Now, straighten up!"

Lord Adrien raised his head in shock. Lord Noel's eyes went wide too, and he stared at me.



I relaxed my hands again and grinned.

“Was it a convincing impression?”

Lord Noel applauded. “Dead on! Trust his fiancée to know him so well. Incredible, Miss Marielle!”

Lord Adrien’s mouth fell open.

“If Lord Simeon were here,” I added, “I’m sure he’d have said it just like that. Pull yourself together! This is clearly a malicious trap that was set for Lord Simeon. Someone went out of their way to pin this crime on him. You must realize that too, Lord Adrien. There’s no way there can have been a box that coincidentally had top-secret documents in it, that you coincidentally bought and gave to Lord Simeon, before Lord Simeon was coincidentally accused, and these documents were coincidentally found as evidence. It’s all a setup. They used you as well, Lord Adrien. The plot was already in motion when you were still in Gandia.”

Hearing that, Lord Adrien’s face looked as though he’d suffered an even bigger shock.

I forcefully clapped my hand on his back—hard enough to count for Lord Simeon, too. “And once you’re aware of that, there’s no point in being down in the dumps and blaming yourself. Instead, let’s think of it as a vital clue. If they didn’t know that you were looking for a souvenir for Lord Simeon, they could never have carried out this plan. Was anyone with you when you went shopping?”

Lord Adrien looked as though he was searching through his memories. “I was with Rose, and Francis,” he said eventually. “And a few of my military colleagues...”

Lord Adrien’s branch of military was the navy. When I thought about his naval colleagues, one man in particular leapt to mind: Commander Kastner, the man I’d encountered at the wedding reception in the gardens of Fleur et Papillon. He had shown great animosity toward Lord Simeon, and parted with some words that sounded rather like a threat.

Could those words really have been a coincidence? Wasn’t it more likely that

he had known Lord Simeon was about to be accused? Perhaps he had simply heard the information from the military police beforehand. But he was in the navy—a separate branch. If that was the case, how and why had he been given information from another branch that shouldn't have been leaked to him?

The groundwork had been laid in Gandia, which made it likely that the shopkeeper had been roped into the scheme beforehand and deliberately led Lord Adrien towards purchasing that specific box. If so, then presumably the culprit was indeed one of Lord Adrien's military colleagues.

"At least we know where to start." The corners of my mouth lifted up into a grin. *Honestly, what a foolish scheme. I'll show them! They will rue the day they tried to bring down Lord Simeon and stand in the way of my happiness.*

As I screwed up my fist in determination, His Highness's words rang in my ears. "Don't start concocting any problematic plans, and don't poke your nose into anything dangerous. Just behave sensibly."

Don't worry, Your Highness. I'll keep my promise. I will obey your order, on my father's honor and Lord Simeon's.

A laugh I couldn't suppress slipped out of my throat. *If all I'm doing is collecting information, then there's no danger, is there? Clearing the suspicion that's been cast upon the one I love is only natural for a fiancée. It's entirely sensible behavior.*

As I laughed to myself, Lord Adrien and Lord Noel both watched me, apparently quite unsettled.

Chapter Six

I went out again the next day, this time to visit the pleasure quarter of Petibon. Located there was the finest, most celebrated, and longest-established brothel in the city, Tarentule.

I'd sent a servant to make an appointment the day before, so the trio I was there to see had freed up a time slot and were awaiting my arrival.

"Oh, you look surprisingly cheerful," said the red-headed Isabelle, affecting a somewhat disappointed tone as she looked at my face. "I thought that even you would be feeling down under these circumstances."

"I told you she would be fine," said the blonde Chloe with a sense of triumph. "Is she the kind of person who lets herself be discouraged by minor setbacks? I bet she's as joyful as ever, knowing what good reference material this will make."

"Not when her fiancé has been arrested," replied the brown-haired Olga, gently chiding both of them. "Not feeling down is very different from feeling joyful."

These were my goddesses, the most superior of all the beautiful blooms of Tarentule: the Three Flowers. No matter how rich a prospective client was, or how noble—or even if he belonged to the royal family—if the Three Flowers didn't like him, they wouldn't so much as drink one cup of tea with him.

I was ushered inside by these figures who could have stepped out of a dream. All three of them at once. *Ah, what extravagance!* Every man in the whole city of Sans-Terre, no, every man in the entire kingdom (except Lord Simeon) would be grinding their teeth in jealousy if they knew that I got to enjoy the pleasure, the heaven-on-earth experience, of having them all to myself.

Before I even brought up the topic at hand, they had made it clear that they already knew about it. Could it be, I wondered, that they thought I'd come here simply to grumble? Had they made time for me just to comfort me? The

thought of that made me realize how much kindness had been hidden even in Isabelle and Chloe's words.

The four of us sat around a table. I opened the box of sweets I'd brought for them. "You already know about what's happened, don't you? Word certainly reaches you quickly."

Chloe poured some tea. One could not call this ordinary tea, however. The tea served at Tarentule was made with the highest quality leaves and prepared using the finest technique. It was so good, it was worth coming here just to drink this one cup. An invigorating scent, reminiscent of fields in the springtime, wafted from the dainty teacup with its motif of violets.

Isabelle spoke as she nibbled on the sweets. "It's likely to be in the newspapers tomorrow, I'd imagine. 'Top Royal Guard Suspected of Breach of Trust!' It's the type of story that journalists drool over and flock to."

Chloe peered at my face. "I'm glad you're not too upset, but is now the time to be visiting us? Don't you need to spend time with your family, or with his?"

"Thank you for your concern. I truly appreciate it. My family has not been affected too badly. My parents and my brother are worried, but they're keeping calm. As for Lord Simeon's family... One member excepted, they've hardly lost their composure at all. They're going about their lives as normal, insisting that it's better to let things take their natural course."

Even the earl, when he briefly showed his face upon returning home, seemed not to have even realized that his son had been arrested. He was a mineralogist, and the type of person to become single-mindedly obsessed if he got his hands on a rare stone. As soon as he arrived, he had shut himself away in his office.

They were quite an impressive and imposing family in many different ways.

"Oh, really? Poor Lord Simeon!" said Chloe, laughing.

"In that case, why did you come here?" asked Olga. "Surely not just for tea and a chat?"

I rested my teacup in its saucer, straightened my back and looked at the three of them.

“I came to ask for your assistance. Tarentule is, of course, Sans-Terre’s foremost focal point for information. People come here who have roles in the worlds of politics and economics, entertainment and the military. It’s even used for secret meetings. If there’s information that doesn’t make its way into this building, it’s not worth knowing. I imagine you even have a deep knowledge of the goings-on in the palace, which is to say that you must know a great deal about this incident as well. I’d like you to tell me what you know. Please, help me clear Lord Simeon’s name!”

I implored them with everything I could muster—but the response came not even a moment later.

“We can’t do that,” said Chloe in a playfully adorable manner.

Isabelle flatly laughed off the request, stating, “I’m sorry, but we’re unable to agree to that.”

Olga gently caressed my cheek with her hand. “Agnès, we really like you, and not only because we’re fans of your work. We’re also friends with you, the young noblewoman. Because of that, you must allow us to be frank with you. We refuse your request.” She spoke with an impossibly gentle and sweet tone, but the words themselves were firm.

Olga continued, “The reason Tarentule is the most famous establishment of its kind in the entire kingdom is that it offers the finest entertainment, the finest food, the finest music, the finest women...and the finest promise of secrecy.”

The three goddesses maintained their smiles, showing no hint that I had angered or even inconvenienced them with my selfish request. As per their nickname, they did not for one moment lose the poise of proudly blooming flowers.

Isabelle added, “The things we see and hear inside Tarentule must not be allowed to leave these four walls. Nor can we share clients’ personal business with other clients. Even if we heard something that would shake the foundations of the country, or the world, we would keep it locked in our hearts and pretend we knew nothing. That’s what it is to be a flower of Tarentule. Because we keep this promise, customers show us their favor. That level of

trust, built up over the course of 150 years, is this establishment's greatest asset. You understand, don't you?"

I silently nodded at the friendly yet admonishing words.

"No matter how much we care about the one making the request," said Chloe, "there are certain things that you simply cannot ask. In your case, for example, even if Lord Simeon begged you, you would never commit plagiarism, would you? You couldn't do anything that interfered with your livelihood as an author."

I nodded again.

"Trust is something that takes time and effort to build up," said Olga, "but only a second to destroy. One indiscretion could ruin everything. Agreeing to your request would mean throwing away a future that is built on 150 years of history. So, with apologies, we'd ask you to refrain from asking us such questions."

I squeezed my hands, resting in my lap, into tight fists. *This is what I expected. They value their clients' trust more than anything else, so I knew they would probably refuse.*

The reason they always called me Agnès, my pen name, was not because they were fans of my novels. It was because they were considerate of the fact that a young lady of the nobility must not be known to be visiting a brothel, so they made sure my real name didn't accidentally reach any unwanted ears. Conversely, if we were outside, they would call me by real name, to ensure that no one learned of my secret life as an author. Even as someone who was not one of their clients, they protected me like that, because it was their *modus operandi*. Ever proud and ever kind—that was the nature of my precious goddesses.

I had thought long and hard before making a request that could threaten to ruin this long-sought friendship. I had almost decided not to, aware that there was no way they would tell me anything no matter how determinedly I asked. Still, I was stubborn enough to wonder if there might be some way they could help me. Before coming here, I had racked my brain to find a solution that would help Lord Simeon without losing their friendship.

I lifted my head, which I hadn't realized had been cast downward, and looked around at the three of them again. "That's what I expected you to say. I'm not suggesting you should abandon your creed, of course. You don't have to give me any information as such. I intend to investigate myself, so there's no need for you to tell me every detail from A to Z. In fact, I already have an idea as to who might be involved. What I need is simply a starting point—an indication as to where I should look next in order to gain further information. Could you give me some sort of a hint, perhaps? Is there really no advice you can give me that doesn't cross the boundaries of Tarentule's code?"

I wasn't asking for them to hand me the answer on a silver platter. I just wanted an indication as to how I might solve the mystery, and then I would work hard to solve it by myself. Surely that would be possible, I told myself. I even considered mentioning Commander Kastner by name, but I feared if I said too much, they would stop talking about the subject entirely. Instead, I thought, maybe if they didn't know who I suspected or intended to investigate, they could give me a clue that didn't involve directly naming anyone, and then it wouldn't interfere with Tarentule's code. Filled with hope, I looked intently at the three ladies.

Their expressions did not change. They exchanged glances for a second, but soon returned their attention to me. Then they began a conversation amongst themselves as they drank their tea and enjoyed the sweets.

"I meant to tell you, I've been invited to go to the theater soon, but I'm not sure what play to see. Watching a boring drama for hours would be agonizing."

"Indeed, there haven't been any good ones lately. I couldn't even recommend one."

"Maybe it would be more enjoyable to plan an evening ourselves. We could throw a lavish party and invite the regulars!"

"Oh, what an idea! The season of socializing has finally arrived, and even people from the countryside have all gathered in the city. A party sounds delightful."

They seemed to be ignoring me entirely and becoming engrossed in this new topic. I bit my lower lip and looked down. *I suppose it was an impossible hope*

after all.

The discussion continued.

“Now that I think, a lot of parties are being held at Fleur et Papillon these days. Why, I believe there’s a masquerade ball there tonight.”

“You’re quite right! I was invited yesterday, but I didn’t quite feel like it, so I turned the gentleman down. But perhaps it would have been better to take advantage of the offer after all? I’m sure I would have gleaned some useful information.”

What should I do? If I really wouldn’t get anything from the Three Flowers, maybe I really had no choice but to ask a paid informant. I even had one in mind already. Using someone like that was a double-edged sword, however, because they would also acquire information about me. In stark contrast to the ladies of Tarentule, they saw selling information as no more than a business, so it was entirely possible that they would be dealing with parties on both sides of the same case. This would go against my promises to His Highness—and Lord Simeon—to avoid doing anything dangerous.

“I can’t be bothered to go myself, but I would be grateful for someone else to go in my stead.”

“Yes, wouldn’t it be such a help if someone who’s used to gathering information, and who really looks at all the tiniest details, could offer to go.”

“And I believe the ball is open for anyone to attend as long as they pay the entry fee.”

I considered what other avenues I could explore. I could apply to work as a servant in Commander Kastner’s home and infiltrate his life that way. If I need a letter of recommendation, I could have my family prepare a real one. Oh, but including the name “Clarac” would be no good. Perhaps I could ask Julianne’s family to help? I have met the commander before, but I’m sure he wouldn’t recognize me, and I expect he’d also let his guard down in his own home. I bet there’s evidence of his evil deeds lying around all over the place.

Or perhaps not, I mused on reflection. That would be far too convenient.

“And the atmosphere will be so different from that of a party held at a

nobleman's manor. That could make it an excellent reference for a novel, perhaps."

"Plus, since it's a masquerade ball, the person who attends would be able to hide their face with a mask. They could go undercover and no one would know it was them."

"Perhaps they'd even have a chance encounter with someone wonderful."

But what other way could there—

Wait, hold on a moment.

I'd been lost in thought and letting their words wash over me, but I finally picked up on something odd about their conversation. When I looked up, their beautiful smiles were fixed on me. I hurriedly thought back on everything they'd said.

Fleur et Papillon... Masquerade ball... Chance encounter with someone wonderful...

I gasped and leapt out of my chair, ready to express my gratitude, but Chloe's pale finger pressed against my lips. Her eyes sparkled, a hint of censure in her look of amusement.

I nodded vigorously and sat down. That's right—they hadn't told me anything. All they had done was discuss a masquerade ball, and hint that it might be worthwhile for me to attend it. It would be odd for me to thank them for that. If I went to this ball, it would simply be to assist them, while gathering reference material for myself on the side.

And yet, I was so intensely glad. Even if I couldn't give words to this feeling, I tried to convey every bit of it that I could using my eyes.

"Just don't say it," said Isabelle with an emphatic wave of her slender hand. "We understand your sentiment, and that's sufficient."

I watched her a moment, then silently reached into the bag beside me and pulled out a package roughly the same size as a box of sweets. I placed it on the table and pushed it toward them meaningfully.

"Please accept this from me."

I opened the parcel to reveal three books. In an instant, cries of joy erupted from the goddesses.

“Hooray! The new Agnès Vivier book!” said Isabelle.

“How thrilling to read it before the release date!” said Olga.

“You signed them, didn’t you? Excellent!” said Chloe.

I added, “Just be sure not to let anyone else get their hands on it before the official release...”

“We understand,” Isabelle replied. “We won’t show anyone.”

“These are just for us to enjoy!” added Chloe.

Even after they’d agreed to a request that had just skirted the edges of violating their code, the Three Flowers were still so glad to receive a gift like this. I was once again grateful to have met them, and for their friendship. *Next time I’ll bring them something even better.*

But I couldn’t stay any longer. After what they had told me, I had to go straight home and get ready.

I stood up and blurted out a few hurried goodbyes. I began to rush off, but just as I was about to leave the room, Olga called from behind me. “Agnès, be careful of the moon.”

“What? The moon?” With my hand on the doorknob, I turned around. I sensed something in Olga’s smile that hadn’t been there up to that point.

“You mustn’t get too close to the moon. It’s highly dangerous. If you find yourself being drawn in, you must run away. You can gaze at the moon from a distance, but you should definitely avoid getting close to it.”

“I...see.”

Accepting the puzzling words of advice, I went out into the corridor. The moon... What was that hinting at, I wondered? I cocked my head in thought, but nothing sprang to mind.

It probably referred to a person, I supposed, but that wasn’t enough to know who she meant. Deciding that I’d probably know when I saw them, I shifted my

thoughts to the masquerade ball for now. *If I go there, I'll gain some useful information.* Would someone be attending who was involved in the plot against Lord Simeon? Would Commander Kastner be there, perhaps?

The idea of marching into the ball on my own left me a bit uneasy, so I thought I might ask Lord Adrien to join me. As a military officer, he'd make a fine bodyguard, and I was sure that he wouldn't need much convincing once he heard it would help toward clearing Lord Simeon's name.

The path leading to the back door was blocked by furniture movers carrying some large pieces into the building, so I set off for the front entrance instead. The hour was still early, so there weren't too many customers around yet. If I left quickly enough, I decided, I would be able to avoid being seen.

But of course, just as I had that thought, I was spotted. A client stepped out into the corridor and stopped as he saw me. "Huh? You're awfully plain for a prostitute. I didn't know Tarentule had girls like that."

A young lady in a brothel would have to either be a lady of the evening herself, or an assistant working there. Since I wasn't wearing a uniform, he seemed to have assumed the former.

He rudely strolled right up to me. An overpowering stench of liquor emanated from him even though it was the middle of the day. "Even up close, you're plain. You can't get that many takers." He laughed, saturating the air with his alcohol-soaked breath.

I gave a slight curtsy and made to leave, but he grabbed my arm to stop me.

"Did you just move here from the country? Well, at least you have your youth. You must still be a teenager, from the looks of it. All right then, I'll be your customer. I'll pay for your services."

"No, you see, I'm just leaving. Terribly sorry, but I can't spend any time with you. Please forgive me."

"Blimey, you're not much to look at, but you're very well-spoken. Your posture's good too, and your mannerisms aren't too shabby... Were you born into the nobility, maybe?"

Internally, I reeled in shock. *How have I suddenly come so close to being*

exposed!?

I didn't recognize the man's face, so I didn't think it was someone I'd met in society. Still, I couldn't be complacent. I pulled down the brim of my hat to hide my face.

"Haha, and now you've fallen to ruin and have no choice but to sell your body, or some such? Why, you poor thing. Come on then, I'll pay you quite handsomely. This way."

Ignoring my responses, the man decided on his own and started to pull me along. The situation was looking grim. I wondered what to do. Could I cry for help, and ask someone who worked here to get me out of this mess? Surely the real ladies of Tarentule would never accept a client in this state either. But if I accidentally caused a conflict, it would also lower the prestige of the establishment, which was not ideal. *Ugh, what do I do!?*

I was trying my hardest to resist his attempts to pull me along without resorting to bad manners when a confident voice interrupted.

"Ah, I thought you were running a bit late."

That deep voice, soaked with a lustrous sensuality, made me momentarily forget the situation as my heart began to pound. When I turned around I saw a magnificent golden-haired man, who appeared to be sparkling with a light far brighter than I had ever seen indoors.

Beyond his loosely tied honey-colored hair, he had golden brown skin that clearly hinted at southern heritage. He was an elegant man, dressed in first-rate clothing to match. An exclamation of "Oh!" slipped out of me.

"Keep your hands off this young lady. She's with me." He spoke these words with a beautiful and seductive smile that would make anyone stare. The man gripping my arm, too, was rapt and dumbfounded. It seemed as though the words directed at him had not even entered his ears.

With a relaxed bearing, the man the color of honey walked over to me, then put his arm around me in a motion as smooth as silk. I caught an alluring scent from his finely tailored clothes. Musk and *bois de rose*, perhaps? His magnificent outfit was the color of red wine—a very adult shade indeed.

The drunkard finally came to his senses once his now-lifeless grip had been gently brushed aside. He glared indignantly, but thankfully did not try to pick a fight, instead withdrawing without further objection.

I put my hand on my chest and breathed a sigh of relief before realizing that my rescuer's arm was still wrapped around my shoulders. I glanced up and was struck by the smile in his eyes.

"Thank you," I stammered, separating myself from him. "You saved me." As quickly as I could while remaining polite, I moved to an appropriate distance.

I had a vague sense that getting too close to him would be dangerous. I doubt he had any particular feelings for me, and neither did I for him, but as a person he was simply so seductive that just being near him set my heart racing. He was an entirely different variety of man than the pure and refined Lord Simeon. He had an allure to him that was every bit as sweet as the color of his hair and eyes. Looking at him was like seeing an optical illusion—the more I gazed, transfixed, the deeper I was ensnared.

But being drawn to another man when I already had Lord Simeon was unthinkable. I told my beating heart that it *must* be still.

Despite having left me trembling, the man replied in a perfectly nonchalant voice, as though he hadn't noticed a thing. "You're very welcome. But if you're walking through this place, you should have one of the employees accompany you. It's careless for a young lady to wander the corridors alone."

"Y...yes, indeed..."

He called to a passing member of the staff and asked them to take me to the exit. His attitude was kind and considerate, just as it had been the last time we met.

I thanked him again and we went our separate ways. I took a brief look behind me as I walked away, but he had already started to walk in the opposite direction.

Bumping into him again was quite a surprise. It was the second time I had been rescued by this impressive gentleman. He had stood up for me when I got involved in the navy's crackdown as well.

It's just a coincidence that we met again...isn't it? He hadn't said anything to indicate otherwise, nor had I caught sight of anything in his behavior that justified any concern. And, while he was the kind of person you see once and can never forget, I had a reputation for being entirely unmemorable even to people who had met me numerous times. If he happened upon me every so often like this, he probably wouldn't even realize it was the same person. I had also been dressed quite differently on that day, so it was likely that he wouldn't make the connection—if he even remembered that incident at all.

Within the city of Sans-Terre, one does sometimes meet the same person more than once, purely by coincidence. I told myself that this was a reasonable conclusion, and that I shouldn't think about it any longer. And yet, some details of what had just occurred still seemed odd to me.

He had understood so unquestioningly that I had been on my way out, and had helped me straight away. Had he known that I wasn't a courtesan of Tarentule? *Well, no one would think I was unless they were quite intoxicated. I don't exactly have an appearance that would normally be associated with the flowers of Tarentule.*

Even so, I'd have expected him to find the circumstances a little mysterious. Shouldn't it have aroused some suspicion to see a young lady alone in Tarentule? Had he thought I was an assistant going out on some errand, perhaps? But then, if that were the case, I'd have been wearing a uniform.

These doubts continued to prey on my mind. Still, I forcibly pushed them away and thought about what I had to do next. I left the building and found a fiacre waiting for customers, told the driver to hurry to House Flaubert's residence, and leapt into the carriage.

Chapter Seven

Less than a week after the wedding reception in the gardens at Fleur et Papillon, I found myself there again. This time the palatial interior was swarming with people.

This was not a private party being held by someone who had hired the venue, but rather one thrown by its owners, and anyone could attend if they paid the entry fee. Though aimed mainly at middle-class partygoers, this was a masquerade ball, so there seemed to be plenty of nobles surreptitiously joining in as well.

I suppose it allows them to let their hair down in a way they can't at upper-class gatherings. For nobles, opportunities to hide their backgrounds and simply have fun were rare and precious. I spotted quite a few people whose true identities I could recognize despite their masks.

"And that's why a mask alone wouldn't have sufficed," I explained to my sullen companion as I gazed around the ballroom while trying to avoid looking to the side. "To really disguise yourself, it has to be a full costume."

"I've been living in Gandia for years," Lord Adrien objected. "I doubt anyone even knows what I look like anymore!"

"Don't underestimate other people's observational skills. There are those in society who watch from the shadows. The ones with so little presence that you don't notice them at all, who blend into the background, are in fact paying close attention to everyone around them."

"Who are you talking about? Why does it sound so much like you're basing that on vast amounts of personal experience?"

"It's just common wisdom in society."

A man who was meandering through the crowd while looking in all directions stopped when I caught his eye. It looked as though he was seeking a dance partner. To ward off the stranger, I snuggled up to Lord Adrien's arm. It was so

soft and fluffy. I found myself beginning to laugh with glee, so I covered my mouth with my free hand. It felt so good that I wanted to nuzzle my cheek up against him.

“Must you do that?” said Lord Adrien.

“It suits you so much,” I said with a chuckle. “Now you really are a dead ringer for Max.”

“Do you have to bring up that stupid dog at every opportunity!? Besides, I’m not a dog, I’m a wolf!”

His full-body animal costume, covered in material that resembled fur, included a full head covering designed to look like a dog...no, a wolf. A bushy tail dangled from his posterior. Passers-by had begun to gather around him, laughing raucously.

“What a relief that people are entertained by it,” I said.

“A relief!?” he cried. “I didn’t come here in the hope of being laughed at!”

Despite being modeled after a wolf, the whole costume was made to be cute and friendly. It was not terrifying in the slightest. Worn to a church fair, it would no doubt have brought endless joy to the children.

“I can hardly believe my family even owned this sort of costume!” he said from under the wolf head mask, sighing wearily.

“Apparently your father wore it at Lord Noel’s birthday party last year. I thought it might be a little on the small side for you, but thankfully it fits perfectly.”

“Father...” he groaned. “Why would you...?”

From what I had heard, the good-natured earl had unabashedly agreed to the request from his adorable youngest child to dress up as a fairy tale wolf. An image appeared in my mind of the guests at the party, their faces conflicted as they stood unsure of whether to laugh at the head of the illustrious House Flaubert, or praise his moxie, or tell him to stop, as Lord Noel looked on gleefully.

Lord Noel had also been the one to suggest this costume after I had asked if

there was any clothing lying around that might help hide our identities. When I saw his faux-angelic smile, I could guess at the similar expression the little devil had no doubt worn at his birthday party.

Of course, our aim for the evening was not to play for laughs, but to gather information, so I decided I should make a quick circuit of the room. However, when I proposed splitting up, Lord Adrien was somewhat reluctant. “Will you be all right on your own?”

“Yes. Trust me, this is my specialty.”

“That’s not what I’m referring to.” The adorable wolf folded his arms and looked me up and down. “I’m asking if you’ll be safe wandering around in that sort of outfit.”

I had borrowed a fairy queen costume from Countess Estelle. She, too, had a mischievous side; one could keenly sense that she was Lord Noel’s mother. She had all sorts of outfits from the numerous masquerade balls she had attended, and of them all, this was the one I had chosen.

The mask had a large flower decoration attached to it, effectively hiding the awkwardness of having to wear it over my glasses. The bodice of the dress was sleeveless and the skirt had a floral pattern. The many layers of thin cloth wavered gently as I walked, allowing glimpses of my legs. Together with the low-cut neckline, it made for a rather daring costume. It was incredibly impressive that Countess Estelle could pull off this outfit in her forties. However, it was too large for me in the chest area, so I had needed to hastily add some stuffing.

Lord Simeon certainly hadn’t inherited his personality from either of his parents. *It sounds as though he takes after his grandfather.* That stubborn honesty had always seemed as though it must have been innate, but perhaps he had acquired it due to his grandfather’s teachings.

It bothered me a little that my legs were so visible, but the others present were also costumed in a variety of weird and wonderful outfits, so I fit right in. Even Lord Adrien didn’t look out of place. However, the main benefit of my costume was that it was easy to move around in. It was very convenient not to be constrained by my skirt. I was beginning to understand why Lady Rose

dressed in men's clothing.

"And on top of that," said Lord Adrien, "you've put on your fraudulent face again."

"Just in case," I replied.

To ensure that my identity wouldn't be discovered even if I took off my mask, I had put even more effort than usual into my makeup. Far from any attempt at a natural look, this time I'd used my face as a canvas and painted it boldly. The finishing touch that perfected it was a rose-colored wig. Disguised like this, I definitely wouldn't be spotted even if I happened upon someone I knew. Even Lord Adrien probably wouldn't have known it was me if he hadn't seen me getting ready.

"At an event like this," I continued, "the bolder the look, the less one stands out. Everyone sees it all as a fleeting dream that will disappear as soon as the night is over, so provocative costumes are the norm. Look at the lady over there. Hers is even steamier than mine."

The woman showing off her ample curves in a southern dancer's costume was Countess Delvincourt, I believed, but I decided not to reveal her identity.

There was a great deal of exposed skin from all the women in attendance. This was a chance to enjoy dressing in a way they normally couldn't, after all. My own costume really did not seem out of place. For all his rude treatment of me, Lord Adrien was worrying about me like a true gentleman—but I was sure it was all right.

It would, in fact, have been more bothersome to stay with Lord Adrien for the entire evening. His eye-catching costume had made it rather crowded in his immediate vicinity, and even aside from that, he was not the sort of person who could make himself inconspicuous. Having him with me at all times would make it hard to operate stealthily. Instead, I planned to ask for his help as a bodyguard only if the need arose.

After promising that I would meet up with him again if I found anyone suspicious, I left him and proceeded further into the ballroom.

I carefully avoided any invitations to dance. When asked, I refused, saying

that I was already promised to another. Looking around, there was a roughly even division between those with masks and those without. I scrutinized both as I walked.

I kept the image of Commander Kastner in my mind and searched assiduously for him in particular. He was indeed present, and I found him quickly. He was dressed as a nobleman from long ago—an overly gaudy costume that did not suit him. Although he wore a wig and a mask, his distinctive red mustache betrayed his identity as clearly as if he had a name tag stuck to his face.

Moving as nonchalantly as I could, I got closer to where he sat. He was not alone; he was talking to a mixed group in a quiet area slightly removed from the dancing masses. Glad that my own mask hid my eyes, I inspected each of them. *If I turn my body to face in a different direction, and then look to the side, they probably won't know I'm looking at them.* I picked up a drink and acted as though I, too, was taking a breather.

The commander's conversation partners consisted of two men—one with a mask and one without—and one woman, who was facing away from me. I didn't recognize the unmasked man. The other seemed more suspicious, but his current position made it hard for me to see him. This mask made my field of vision rather narrow at the best of times, but at this precise angle, the rim of my glasses obstructed my view as well. I wondered if it was safe to turn myself just a tiny bit more in their direction.

Just as I had that thought, the woman in the group turned to the side, and I caught sight of her face. My breath caught in my throat and I just barely stopped myself from reacting more visibly. Feigning nonchalance as staunchly as I could manage, I confirmed it was who I thought it was while still looking sideways. There was no doubt. Her short hair was gracefully tied up as part of her moon goddess costume, but I knew that beautiful face. That mysterious charm, a mixture of elegance and allure. I could not tear my eyes away from her.

But why?

Why was Lady Rose here? What was she doing with the commander?

My heart pounded violently, even painfully. I wanted to put a hand on my

chest to calm myself, but I held strong. *I have to make it appear as though I'm not looking at them.* Still, I couldn't stop myself from trembling. I drank the remainder of my glass in one gulp and told myself to calm down.

Was it pure coincidence that Lady Rose was sitting with Commander Kastner? Were they simply acquaintances—did she in fact have nothing to do with this scheme? Perhaps they'd even met here for the first time and found they got along with one another. Or was she in fact the commander's co-conspirator?

I thought back to what Lord Adrien had said about the document box that had been used to frame Lord Simeon. The list of people who had been with him when he went to buy it had included Lady Rose. Since she was a close friend, and was planning to return to Lagrange with him, it wasn't at all strange that she would go shopping with him. He'd said that some of his fellow sailors were there, so I'd focused on those alone and not really taken in the fact that Lady Rose had been there too.

Was that a mistake on my part? Was Lady Rose the one I should have suspected?

It seemed entirely plausible that she was the culprit. Thinking it through, there was no reason it had to be someone from the navy. I'd assumed it was one of the sailors because I'd been preoccupied with the commander's apparent involvement, but the scheme with the box could have been arranged by anyone Lord Adrien was close to who was in Gandia at that time.

She would also have known Lord Simeon's character. She'd have known that a rosewood box suited his taste, and that he would use it rather than stowing it away. It was a practical item, and a gift from his brother, so of course he would put it somewhere prominent enough that the military police found it straight away.

It would take an old friend, perhaps, to know how he would behave. If Lady Rose, who had some sort of unknown connection to Lord Simeon—who might have even been his lover once—had been the one, then...

And what about the day we had passed one another in our carriages? Had there been some special reason she was visiting House Flaubert? Not only to say hello, but to lay the groundwork in some way before the military police

searched the house? To check what Lord Simeon had done with the box, perhaps, so the plan could be set in motion?

When I put the pieces together like that, it all seemed entirely within the realm of possibility. I began to feel convinced that the circumstances pointed to Lady Rose as one of the criminals.

Except...

What would be the reason? Why on earth would she have wanted to frame Lord Simeon?

When they'd been reunited at the port, I hadn't sensed any discord between them. They'd been enthusiastic and joyful in each other's presence, and she hadn't shown even the slightest hint of antagonism toward him. In fact, what had unsettled me at the time was that they were getting along *too* well. The rapport between them had been so strong, it had given me foolish ideas that she might take Lord Simeon from me. It felt inconceivable that she could have been planning something like this all along!

So maybe it is all a coincidence? Perhaps Lady Rose has nothing to do with it at all? I hoped that was the case. Whether she was a former lover or merely a friend, it didn't change the fact that she was someone special to Lord Simeon. I didn't want to believe that she would set him up. *Lord Simeon cares about you! Don't hurt him, I beg you!*

And so, despite my growing suspicion of Lady Rose, I fought to deny it all in my mind. I realized then how emotionally I was viewing the situation. *Stop it, Marielle. Keep a level head.* I reminded myself that I had come here to search for clues, and that the number one goal was to clear Lord Simeon's name. That was what mattered above all else. I had to analyze everything rationally, not let emotion cloud my judgment.

In any case, I decided to move a little closer. I had to hear what they were talking about. *It's all right. They won't realize it's me in this outfit.*

I put down my glass, and then—trying to make it look as natural as possible—I turned to face the direction of Lady Rose and her companions. I began to walk with an unsteady gait, feigning drunkenness. I hardly managed a step before I stopped in fright.

He's watching. The masked man sitting with the commander had turned to look at me. I could feel his gaze from behind the mask.

His mask was white, with a design on it akin to a tattoo, and covered his entire face. With it he wore a long white robe reminiscent of a wizard, or perhaps a ghost or spirit that might appear in a play. A white veil cascaded down from his head. I wondered what sort of costume it was meant to be, but maybe he wasn't dressed as anything in particular. His white gloves covered every visible part of his arms. I had no idea whether he was young or old; the most I could be sure of was that he was a man.

Even for a masquerade ball, it was unusual to cover one's entire body so thoroughly. Was there a particular reason that he really didn't want anyone to know his identity? Because he was executing some sinister plan, perhaps?

I recalled what Olga had said about the moon. I had not seen anyone I could be sure fitted that description, but if I'd been told this man was dressed as some sort of moon spirit, I'd have believed it. Was he the dangerous "moon" that I had to ensure I didn't get too close to?

If it was purely a matter of his costume, however, it seemed that Lady Rose might fit the bill more precisely. She was definitely dressed as a moon goddess. Her red-tinged hair could be described as the color of the moon right before it sank beneath the horizon. And, just as Olga had hinted, she was a beautiful person that I found myself drawn towards. She could absolutely have been the "moon" in question.

Which of them was it? Or was it neither?

The white-clad man started to move. He slowly stood and began to walk over to me, his masked face looking straight at me the entire time. Commander Kastner, Lady Rose, and the other man sitting with them all turned to face me as well.

What should I do? Should I run away? But if I panic and run off now, I might as well hold up a sign telling them to find me suspicious. If I'm not really me, then what reason should I have to run?

Yes, I told myself, I'm just an ordinary participant in the masquerade ball. If I were a young lady wandering around the ballroom in search of dance or

conversation partners, how would I behave if I caught someone's eye? Why, I'd probably respond with great enthusiasm.

I reassured myself that nothing was wrong. I had transformed my appearance with makeup and a wig, and on top of that, I was wearing a mask. Not even people who knew me would have recognized me. Even if this man did know a young lady called Marielle Clarac, he couldn't have realized I was that same person.

Despite the cold sweat I felt on my back, I stood my ground. I didn't turn away in a manner that might seem unnatural, but simply kept watching the man as he came closer. Seeing his relaxed and graceful bearing, I had a sense of *déjà vu*. I couldn't tell much about his physique with the robe and veil hiding so much of his body, but from his height, it seemed like... But then I reconsidered. He didn't seem trained enough to be a military officer. His way of walking and the entire air about him seemed different.

He was probably a nobleman, I decided. I was sure I'd met him somewhere before. If he came close enough, and I heard his voice, it seemed likely that I would know who he was.

My heart was beating so intensely that I grew irritated with it. I rested a hand on my chest to try and calm myself. From an onlooker's perspective, it probably looked as though I was excited. I acted as though I was a single young lady, eagerly awaiting an invitation to dance or to chat, simply waiting for him to come closer.

Then, suddenly, another man wrapped his arm around me without even saying a single word.

"What? I..."

The tall man forcefully pulled me toward him, and I collided with him, my cheek landing on his broad chest. Then he began to walk off with me in tow, in this state where I was nestled against his upper body.

"E-Excuse me..."

A drunk? Or perhaps a man trying to force me to dance with him? I looked up at him, prepared to tell him I refused, and an ominous form came into view.

It was a demon. Two horns protruded from his mask, and long black hair flowed down over his black outfit. He wore a traveler's cloak and overcoat, which were ripped in several places. The material itself was high quality, but it had been torn to craft the atmosphere for his costume.

I fell silent. I was transfixed and could not pull my eyes away. I simply looked up at the demonic mask in a daze.

As we walked, the demon adjusted his grasp of my body. He put one arm around me and then took my other hand in his...and, as though it was the most natural thing in the world, we began to dance. I left it all to my graceful lead and simply followed the music. I didn't have to worry about the difference in height—he led me too well to worry about anything. Even in this crowded ballroom, where you'd expect to collide with other couples on occasion, he skilfully avoided everyone as we whirled around and around. Even as I found myself becoming disoriented, I had no need for concern. He supported me firmly with his large hands. I felt warmth emanating from both the hand on my back and the hand in which he held mine.

My nerves and fear from a moment ago had disappeared entirely. As we danced, we moved quite a distance, leaving Commander Kastner, Lady Rose and the robed man far behind us. Beneath the sparkling chandelier, my dress and the demon's cloak floated through the air as we revolved. He gazed at me intently. His grotesque facade did not horrify me at all, it only enchanted me. *If there's such a thing as being drawn to someone, this is most definitely it. He could take me anywhere right now, and I wouldn't even mind.*



Speaking of which, the demon was in fact leading me out of the ballroom. We danced our way to the far edge, then went through a small door that had been left propped open. Even as we stopped dancing, we continued to walk apace. Surrounding the ballroom were numerous small rooms for guests to relax in. The demon took me to the farthest one from the ballroom, then pulled me inside.

He shut the door and we faced one another. It was just the two of us, with all the music and tumult far in the distance. Finally unable to contain myself, I embraced him.

“Lord Simeon!” I cried, exploding in a burst of joy. I drew my cheek up to his warm chest and confirmed his presence with my whole body. Even with his face hidden, even with him wearing a wig of an entirely different color than his real hair, I had known right away. In his strong arms, I was calmed and reassured to the depths of my soul. That was the warmth I had been missing. It was mere days since we had last met, but I felt as though we had been apart for ages. *Is it truly not a dream? Is Lord Simeon really here?*

“Lord Simeon, Lord Simeon, Lord Simeon!” Repeating his name like an idiot, I hugged him with all my might. My arms didn’t reach all the way around his broad back, so it was less a hug and more simply grabbing onto him. *Yes, this is definitely Lord Simeon. His large, well-honed body, his gentle arms hugging me back... My very own knight is right here before me!*

“Lord Simeon...” Tears of relief and joy began to well up. I looked up at his demon mask. “Lord Simeon, let me see your face.”

He pushed up the mask with his long fingers, revealing light blue eyes that looked down at me with a stern glint in them. He took off my mask as well, and sighed with frustration, perhaps even anger. But even with him in bad humor, I couldn’t contain my own joy. “You’ve been released! Were you cleared of suspicion?”

“It’s not me I’m concerned about, but you.” He rebuked me in a deep tone that harbored anger without a doubt, then adopted his usual lecturing posture, with his hand on his hip. “Why did you boldly march into a place like this? Didn’t His Highness tell you to stay put? Why can’t you follow a simple order?”

Even though he was telling me off, hearing Lord Simeon's voice made me so happy. He was really there, right in front of me. I could reach out and touch him. I was satisfied with that alone.

And yet, despite that, I did start to feel somewhat indignant at being badgered like this. "Why? I can't believe you need to ask. You were baselessly accused of a crime—was I supposed to simply wait and do nothing, even though I knew it was part of a plot to frame you? Did you expect me to sit at home, crying, waiting for someone else to come along and save the day?"

"You were ordered to wait! You promised you would. On your father's honor and mine, I seem to recall. You clearly gave your word to His Highness, and yet you broke it so flagrantly. What do you think a vow to the crown prince is, exactly? I assure you, it's not something to be broken so easily."

"I haven't broken it. I've kept my word comple—" I furrowed my brow. "Hold on. What are you saying, exactly? How do you know what I told His Highness?"

For the briefest moment he wore a look of shock at having been caught out. He quickly resumed scowling as he had before, but he couldn't hide it from me.

"Were you listening?" I continued. "When I spoke to His Highness yesterday, were you somewhere nearby? You being arrested and held in custody—was it all a complete lie!?"

"It wasn't a lie," he responded. "I was indeed under investigation. Officially, publicly, I'm still considered to be held in custody."

"And yet, here you are! So in what way is it not a lie!?"

"I'll explain the details to you later. I can't talk about it here, so please don't ask me."

A flat refusal to give in to my objections. Sensing that this was top-secret business, I had no choice but to fall silent. I bit my lip and glared at Lord Simeon bitterly.

I had been so worried about him. Even though I'd told myself that it was Lord Simeon, so of course he would be all right... Even though Countess Estelle and her friends had managed to reassure me. And even though I'd decided there was no need to be too dispirited... I still hadn't been able to feel entirely calm

about the situation. Alone in my bed, the fear had begun to close in. The fear that I might never see him again. I'd asked my brother about the sentence for breach of trust, and when he told me that in some cases it could be the death penalty, the world before my eyes went dark.

I told myself: *I won't let that happen. I will save Lord Simeon no matter what. I'll clear his name and restore his honor!* I reassured myself as best I could, gave myself courage, so that I didn't fall to pieces.

And yet.

Here he stood before me with an expression that suggested the situation was perfectly normal. It was unspeakably irritating.

I was truly happy that he was free, of course. It was a relief to know that Lord Simeon indeed wasn't going down without a fight, and that His Highness wasn't handling the accusation in a purely formal and disinterested manner, but was secretly working with him. At the same time, it was more aggravating than I could describe. If Lord Simeon had known about this from the start, and had only pretended to fall into this trap, he should have told me! What about all my fear and anxiety!? What about my efforts to help him!? I'd fought as hard as I could to gather information, even convincing the Three Flowers to help me in a way that bordered on violating their sacred code.

Tears welled in my eyes again, but for a different reason than before. Now that I'd relaxed and lost my studious command of my emotions, I could no longer restrain the rage that was building in me.

Seeing my tears, Lord Simeon loosened his grimace slightly. "I'm in the middle of an exceptionally important investigation. One that's fraught with danger. I didn't want you to get involved. His Highness told you to wait for the result of the investigation, didn't he? He made it clear that he would investigate thoroughly, so why couldn't you simply do that and wait patiently?"

And still he didn't cease his lecture. He continued to scold me, as if I was the only one in the wrong. In addition to my annoyance, I began to feel rather melancholy.

"Would you have waited, Lord Simeon? If the situation were reversed, would you have merely sat there and done nothing?"

He did not respond, so I continued.

“Oh, silly me. Of course you would. No matter what the circumstances, if His Highness told you to wait, you would keep a level head and faithfully obey, wouldn’t you? Even if I had been arrested, your loyalty to His Highness would take priority, wouldn’t it? You love His Highness more than me, don’t you!?”

“Kindly refrain from using a phrase that’s so easily misinterpreted! This conversation has taken a strange turn. You’re straying from the matter at hand.”

“No, I’m not! Knowing that His Highness is investigating doesn’t mean I can be certain your name will be cleared! If he couldn’t prove your innocence, then what? Should I have simply waited for the results, doing nothing at all, and then accepted that you were guilty? Completely impossible, obviously! I work hard to get the results I wish for. I achieve those results—I take them for myself. I can’t simply wait to see what other people do, and then give up if it turns out to be impossible for them!”

Lord Simeon cradled his head in his hands and sighed deeply. He made a face that suggested he was utterly at the end of his tether. Seeing him like that made the tears start to well up even more, and I sniffled softly. Somewhere in my mind was a voice saying that I should hold back the tears, because if I cried now my face would be in a complete state of disarray, but Lord Simeon was so lacking in understanding that I couldn’t stop my own miserable reaction.

“Even so,” he replied at last, “you shouldn’t have come here. How can I feel calm if you’re putting yourself in danger? Can’t you at least understand that?”

“I was only intending to gather information. To watch people who seemed like they might be involved in the plot against you, secretly listen to their conversations, and note any details that might help to solve the case. What’s so dangerous about that? I didn’t have any reckless ideas about trying to catch the criminals myself.”

“If they notice you watching them, that’s still dangerous. Very dangerous indeed.”

“Notice me? Look at how I’m dressed! Look at my makeup! You are the one and only person who would know it was me under all this. No one else could

ever know.”

“We can’t say that for certain. In fact, weren’t you in a somewhat precarious position just before I stepped in?”

Struck by his words, I wavered a moment. “Well, I...” It was true that I had been surprised and a little scared. The man in the long robe—why *had* I caught his eye? “I don’t think he had figured out my identity. In all likelihood, he was simply looking for a dance partner and thought I might be suitable.”

“Or perhaps he had noticed you watching his group at the table. And even if not... Even if his only intention was to ask you to dance... That’s dangerous in and of itself.”

“Is it?” Dancing...dangerous? I cocked my head, unsure of what he meant. Lord Simeon wasn’t joking; he had an exceedingly serious face, just as he always did. I couldn’t think of any time he hadn’t been serious. “What would be dangerous about that?”

He sighed loudly again. *Erk, it seemed like he made that one loud on purpose.* “I suppose I’ve no choice but to explain, since it’s clear that you’ll keep endangering yourself otherwise. Consider that you are only eighteen years old, and a young lady from a noble family that exercised great care in raising you. You may be slightly different from the average young lady —more than slightly, if we’re honest —but in the most fundamental aspects, you are still the same. As much as you may protest that your family’s rank is only middling, House Clarac is still a proper noble house aiming to preserve its dignity. Your parents raised you in such a way that you would behave respectably and not involve yourself in anything inappropriate. You may have grown in a slightly unusual direction of your own accord, but you’re still equipped with all the discretion that you are meant to have. Putting your specific tendencies aside, you can in fact be seen as a thoroughly upper-class young lady.”

I frowned. I didn’t understand what he was getting at, aside from a vague feeling that he was praising me. His tone was lecturing and he used some delicate euphemisms in places, but to sum up, he appeared to be saying I was a young lady with a good upbringing. But what was the problem with that?

“What are you trying to tell me?” I interrupted.

In response, Lord Simeon became momentarily lost for words. “Well, I, you see...” He turned away from me and made a very troubled face. Now I understood even less and felt simply bewildered. At last he said, “What do you think these rooms are used for?” With a hand, he gestured at the small room we were occupying.

I cocked my head and replied, “For resting, surely? For times when one wishes to go somewhere quiet and take a breather.”

“Only take a breather? Nothing more?”

“Hmm?”

He hesitated a moment longer, then asked, “In the romance novels you know so well, do scenes like this never occur? Two people escape alone from the ballroom, and then... That sort of scene.”

I clapped my hands together. “Oh!” At last I understood his meaning. “Yes, I understand! They’d come for a secret rendezvous! To enjoy a one-night stand, or a casual relationship, or an indiscretion between two people whose burning love is strictly forbidden! Then an illegitimate child is born and it causes quite a problem for their families, and before too long it grows into a scandal that threatens to shake the foundations of the kingdom!”

Lord Simeon quickly interrupted me. “You don’t need to take this and run so far with it!”

But I was just showing that I finally understood his meaning!

He sighed and pressed his fingers to his temple. “Anyway, you’ve got the gist of it. Amongst all this boisterous merrymaking, there are a lot of men with ulterior motives. Even if you express no interest, there’s still the risk of them bringing you here by force.”

“How do you know that, Lord Simeon? Have you forced someone into one of these rooms? Or been forced into one yourself?”

“Why would you think someone had forced me into one!? Anyway, neither is true!”

I pouted and looked away, and Lord Simeon continued.

“That such a danger exists simply goes without saying. If you were being closely guarded by a family member or a servant then there would be no problem, but you have a unique degree of energy and determination that leads you to go anywhere and everywhere by yourself. And, while a masquerade ball will at the best of times be filled with people behaving in entirely too free-wheeling a manner, a suggestive outfit like that can only attract *more* attention. How can you wear that and not believe it to be dangerous?”

“Suggestive? This?” I looked down at my dress. Certainly, it exposed a little more of my body than usual, and glimpses of my legs were visible when I moved. Still, its original owner was Countess Estelle—Lord Simeon’s own mother. It was a little bold, but hardly vulgar. “This is one of the more subdued dresses on display tonight. You were in the ballroom, so you should know that. This is relatively plain compared to what the other ladies are wearing.”

“It can’t possibly be called plain. It’s very provocative, in fact. Letting others have a peek at parts of you that are usually hidden modestly beneath layers of clothing... It unleashes a tremendous amount of power. Didn’t you say something like that yourself once? Being excited by skin that one only catches a glimpse of is your own area of expertise, I believe.”

“Even the same amount of skin can have a different effect depending on who is displaying it. With my skinny frame, exposing my body has the opposite effect. Carnal attraction requires the person in question to be more full-figured and voluptuous.”

The conversation had somehow drifted quite far from its original topic. Despite knowing that this was not at all what we had been arguing about, I had worked myself up to an extent that I couldn’t return to normal. Lord Simeon and I were having a serious war of words about our respective views on what made women alluring.

“You should understand how men feel about this,” I continued. “What characteristics make a woman appealing? A full bosom and shapely behind, surely?”

“I’m saying this *because* I understand. Admittedly, a fuller-figured woman does tend to draw the eye, but that hardly means those are the only types of

women that any man likes. There are plenty who much prefer slimmer and more youthful-looking girls. Furthermore, those types of men in particular tend to possess entirely reprehensible dispositions. They intentionally seek out girls who have not reached maturity with the intention of engaging in unpardonable behavior.”

“Well, excuse me for not having ‘reached maturity’! I’m not going to grow any further, I’ll have you know!”

“No, I’m not suggesting there’s anything wrong with that...”

“How do you understand those perverted thoughts so well? Is it because you share them, Lord Simeon? Is that why you proposed to me? I see, so your black-heartedness extends into the realm of having a taste for little girls? I’m afraid I can’t fangirl over that. In fact, it has quite the opposite effect on me!”

“A taste for little girls!? Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t care about anyone but you —whether the others are voluptuous or skinny!”

“So you *are* saying I’m skinny!”

“You’re the one who said that! If you want my opinion, you’re a perfectly beautiful flower. You stir up a desire to protect you, to keep you safe, but also a desire to pluck you and make you mine. It’s difficult for me to feel comfortable with you letting other men see that as well. I don’t like it when you’re not your usual inconspicuous self!”

“I’ve heard of a doting parent, but a doting fiancé? Just because you’re in love with me doesn’t mean you need to think I’m so special!”

“How could I not think that when I’m in love with you!?”

We both raised our voices more and more until we were practically blue in the face, then finally stopped to catch our breath. My shoulders rose and fell as I panted.

All of a sudden, I came to my senses. Hesitantly I said, “I feel as though I’ve just experienced an ardent attempt to woo me.”

“After all this time I’m not sure I need to woo you, but I suppose I did use some...rather embarrassing phrasing.”

I reflected back on this conversation with a slightly cooler head, and had a sense that by the end it had turned into a confused and preposterous argument. What had begun as a discussion about the secret plot had taken a strange turn somewhere along the way.

Lord Simeon's pale face turned slightly red. He covered his mouth with his hands and turned away. My cheeks, too, were growing steadily hotter.

"Lord Simeon?" I asked haltingly. He remained silent, so I continued. "Could it be that the reason you become so cross whenever I dress up is because you're such a doting fiancé?"

In a fleeting glance he showed me the mixed feelings in his eyes, but then he continued looking away. "Cross? It's more that... Well, seeing you look so lovely is certainly a feast for the eyes, but it makes me unhappy to know that now other men will notice you, and I start to worry that someone—like a certain petty criminal—will make disgraceful attempts at seducing you."

This man who always spoke so clearly was murmuring as though it was very difficult for him to express these thoughts. The one side I could see of his face was blushing and pouting at the same time. My cheeks became even hotter.

I can hardly bear this! My heart is pounding so hard it hurts!

"You really are a doting fiancé, aren't you?"

I put my hands on both sides of Lord Simeon's face and turned his head toward me. The cutting sharpness had disappeared from his light blue eyes completely. Even as he glared at me with a glum expression, there was nothing scary in his look at all.

"I can say the same about you," I continued. "You're endlessly dashing all the time, no matter how you dress. You surely know that you're stared at by every woman who sees you? As a virtuous knight, you are as beautiful as a work of art, and even in this demon costume I can't get enough of you. The black hair really suits you, you know. I don't even need to supplement it with my own imagination—it's already packed full of dangerous appeal. It's so wonderful, it makes me fangirl over you all over again. For this outfit, the right prop wouldn't be a riding crop, but perhaps a black spear, or the Grim Reaper's scythe? You are, without a doubt, tonight's hottest commodity."

“I’m hardly aiming to win the costume contest,” Lord Simeon replied. “It was supplied by the court ladies at the palace.”

“Excellent work on their part, as I’d expect.”

“What ‘work’ are you talking about?”

Then he took a single breath and put his arms around me. Suddenly he pulled my body toward his, and we once again basked in each other’s warmth. All the feelings that had thrown my heart into such disarray vanished into thin air, and I was filled with nothing but love. With no thought of who initiated it, our lips naturally began to move closer together.

If only it had been like this from the start. What a waste to start arguing straight away when we were finally reunited! Lord Simeon should have kissed me first, then started lecturing me. Then he’d have disarmed me enough that I wouldn’t have fought so hard.

His breath came nearer, and I softly closed my eyes. I was ready to surrender my body to the sweet excitement that I’d been craving.

An instant before I could, the door flew open violently.

“Marielle Clarac!” yelled a humanoid wolf in the doorway. “What in blazes are you doing!?”

Oh, of course. He’s here as well. I’d forgotten about him completely. I wished I could have forgotten about him a tiny bit longer.

“What utterly deplorable behavior, sneaking off to have illicit relations with some unknown man! You hussy! Have you forgotten why we came here in the first place? Certainly not to fish for men! Does Simeon not matter to you at all? What were you thinking!?” He thrust his felt paw pads at us as he barked.

Lord Simeon’s shoulders sank. He looked crestfallen. His back still to the interloper, he said to me, “Unfortunate timing. Hmm, I feel as though something similar might have happened the other day...”

It’s true. And we were just getting to the good part!

Lord Adrien barged into the room and put his paws on Lord Simeon’s back. “And you!” he threatened in a low and militant voice. “This woman is engaged,

you scoundrel! No matter how ugly and demented she is, she's currently expected to join my family. Catching her in an act like this is sufficient grounds for me to insist my brother break off the engagement, but putting that aside for now, I demand that you remove yourself!"

But the menace in his voice was no match for the icy glare that turned to face him. "Adrien, I believe I told you not to insult her."

"How do you know my name? And what grounds do you have to refer to me in such a familiar manner?" He froze as he finally realized who he had been accosting. His eyes became saucers. "Wait... What? Huh?" He opened and closed his mouth several more times, but no proper words came out. He flapped his forelegs in a vain panic. "What? But... S...Simeon?" he managed at last. "But that can't be true. Are you really here?"

With a baffled expression, Lord Adrien looked back and forth between me and his brother. It was just like my neighbor's pet dog when he had confused his owner for someone suspicious, then been shocked when his owner spoke to him.

He stared at Lord Simeon's face, unblinking. Then, in a flash, it seemed he had more or less digested the situation. In a sudden turn, his face sparked with joy and he opened his arms wide. "Simeon!"

He charged forward, full of vigor, intending to embrace Lord Simeon with his fluffy body. However, Lord Simeon coldheartedly dodged out of the way. It seemed the appeal of the soft, cuddly fur was lost on him.

Lord Adrien was left hugging nothing but air. With a look of hurt, he turned to face his brother. "Simeon..."

"We don't have time for foolish chatter. Adrien, go home right away and take Marielle with you." He gave his brother this order with a face that suggested he had completely forgotten the slightly absurd argument we'd been having moments before. I was ready to object, but he held me back with a stern look. "Marielle, I'll be in touch with you soon, but please go home for tonight. Leave the investigation here to me, all right?"

Having been instructed so firmly, I closed my mouth. Indeed, if Lord Simeon was there, then there was no need for me to put in such effort to help him. I

was sad that it seemed all my worries and endeavors so far had been discarded as useless, but I couldn't get in Lord Simeon's way.

Then, just as I was about to express my agreement, I remembered something key. *That's right... Lady Rose.* Did Lord Simeon know? I had to tell him that she'd been sitting with the commander.

I looked up at him. Struck by his light blue eyes, I was unsure of what to say. How could I tell him in a way that would convey it properly? It could definitely hurt him to hear that a person he thought was his friend, who was perhaps even a former lover, might be collaborating with the enemy.

He had been there too, though. Had he seen her? Maybe he had already noticed her presence, and there was no need for me to go out of my way to mention it. But...what if he hadn't?

He interrupted my moment of indecision by putting an arm around my shoulder and beginning to walk. "Go on," he urged. "Quickly." Lord Adrien followed us with a look of discontent.

"Lord Simeon, I..."

I had to tell him, I decided. I didn't want to hurt him, but the most important thing was to bring the plot to light and clear the suspicion hanging over him. If someone close to Lord Simeon had betrayed him, that was all the more reason he had to know. My decision made, I opened my mouth to speak.

But, before I could continue, a scream rang through the corridor.

"What was that?" As I reacted with shock, Lord Simeon pushed me behind him in an instant. Lord Adrien went past me and stood beside his brother.

Two people tumbled out of another room, both screaming at the top of their lungs. A man and a woman—they must have gone there to rest for a moment, or perhaps with more intimate plans in mind. The woman ran off in a visible state of disarray, while the man collapsed to the floor.

"What's going on?" murmured Lord Adrien.

Lord Simeon rushed ahead to the room in question. I followed closely, not willing to be left behind.

The man on the floor frantically struggled as though he was trying to crawl away. When he noticed me, he pointed into the room with a quivering hand. Wailing, he uttered, “I... He... I...”

It was a pathetic sight indeed. *What could have made a man like this be so struck with terror? Can whatever he saw really be that shocking?* I steeled my nerves and stepped into the room. But in an instant, Lord Simeon’s back obscured my view. He stretched out his arms to keep me back. “Don’t look!”

“Why n—” I looked up, and he was still facing into the room. I was about to ask what was wrong when I caught a whiff of a foul stench.

This metallic smell...

A large number of footsteps and voices drew nearer. Lord Simeon instantly pulled his mask down back onto his face, then turned to put mine back on as well.

In that moment, I saw. In the small gap that was left when Lord Simeon turned, I saw a person passed out in the room. A man, lying face up, not moving a muscle. His clothes and the surrounding floor were stained a garish shade of red.

I put my hands over my mouth to suppress a scream. Noticing this, Lord Simeon pulled me into his chest. I could no longer see it, but it was too late. I’d already seen it —the man lying in a pool of blood, foaming at the mouth. He had already left this mortal coil.

Though I hadn’t noticed his arrival, Lord Adrien was next to us, speechless at the sight of the room. “What... What is...”

Lord Simeon whispered an instruction to him. “Adrien, we need to get out of here right now.”

Lord Adrien barely had a chance to respond before Lord Simeon began to move, still clutching me. An uproar began to form around us as more and more people arrived and realized what had happened. Cries of “Murder!” resounded in the corridor.

We disappeared into the ever-growing crowd of onlookers. Hidden amongst all the confusion, we hurried toward the exit.

“The police will be called soon,” said Lord Simeon. “Everyone who was there will be a suspect, so if we linger too long, we won’t be allowed to leave. No one can know that we were here. We must escape now while we have the chance.”

“Right!” I replied. Leaving aside my own presence, if Lord Simeon was caught here, it would be a major issue. How could he excuse it when he was supposed to be in custody due to another case? For him to additionally be present at the scene of a murder would surely not be seen as mere coincidence. *If he’s accused of murder on top of all that’s happened so far, it would be more than I can bear!*

Could it have been deliberate? Had they intentionally committed a crime near where Lord Simeon was?

I tried to tell myself that no one would ever go that far. And yet, I could not get the image of the man out of my mind as he lay there, blood spilling from his chest. Though I’d only looked briefly, I had still caught sight of his face. It was, without a doubt, one of the people who had been sitting with Commander Kastner.

Did the commander...kill that man?

My body trembled. After leaving the warm room, my revealing outfit left me slightly cold even with Lord Simeon’s arm around my shoulders. However, I was sure I was not shivering due to the cold. A chill made its way up my back and through my entire body.

“Vice Captain, this way!” called a voice from a nearby corner. It was Alain. He led us through a back door that was slightly off the beaten path. I remembered that I had left my coat inside, but there was no time to go back for it. Withstanding the cold night air, I clung to Lord Simeon.

We weren’t the only attendees running out of that door. I had no doubt that some of them simply wanted to avoid the inconvenience of being detained, while others, like us, wanted to ensure that no one ever knew they had been there. All of them filtered into the dark of the night and left Fleur et Papillon behind them.

Amongst those making their escape, I saw a mane of golden hair that stood out even in the darkness. It reflected the light from inside the building, shining

like the moon.

I paused for a moment, but Lord Simeon hurried me along. When I looked again I had lost sight of the man, but I could never have mistaken that impressive sight. It was him—the same gentleman I had met in Tarentule earlier that day. He wasn't even wearing a costume, and the young black-haired boy, his servant, was with him as well.

Why was he here? What had he been doing? I hadn't noticed him in the ballroom. Had he quickly changed clothes, or had he been wearing ordinary clothes with a costume over the top that could be easily removed?

Our series of encounters began to prey on my mind. I couldn't see it all as a coincidence anymore. Who on earth was that man? Why did he keep appearing everywhere I went?

But no answer was forthcoming. I was bundled into the waiting carriage, where Lord Simeon wrapped me in his cloak and held me close. We left all the commotion behind us and sped off into the night.

Chapter Eight

Lord Simeon took me straight home that night, and left without giving me an opportunity to ask any questions.

My mind was full to the brim with details I could make neither head nor tail of. It reached a point where I could hardly make sense of anything anymore.

At the very least, Lord Simeon was safe. Being able to confirm that gave me endless joy and reassurance.

Still, though I'd only seen it for a moment, I couldn't stop thinking about the dead body. I didn't sleep a wink until my cat came into my bed in the middle of the night to soothe me with its body heat and soft purring.

This left me yawning repeatedly the next day. After breakfast I quite wanted to go back to bed, but I waited in case Lord Simeon contacted me. Just as I hoped, a carriage bearing the royal coat of arms arrived during the morning. It had been sent from the palace under the pretext of an invitation to tea from Princess Henriette. I assumed it had actually been arranged by Prince Severin, but I brought a present for his sister just in case.

The carriage dropped me off in a different location than I was used to, and I was led along an unfamiliar passage. When I arrived at the room, master and servant were present as expected.

"Miss Marielle," His Highness began, glaring at me with an imposing stance and a frightening expression. "I assume you know why I've summoned you."

Lord Adrien, who had been summoned as well, recoiled and blanched at the prince's anger.

I replied, "To finally explain what's going on, yes? I'm expecting a proper account this time."

"Before that, don't you have something to say to me?"

"Are you quite certain it's all right for me to say it? Well, if you insist. You are

a liar, Your Highness. How *dare* you deceive me like that!”

“What!? You’re the liar!”

When I finally gave voice to the resentment I’d been holding onto since the night before, the prince erupted in a crash of thunder. But I was not scared. *I’m the one who’s angry at him!* I lifted my chin haughtily.

“It was only two days ago,” he raged. “The day before yesterday! Have you forgotten your vow to me? Don’t start concocting any problematic plans, don’t poke your nose into anything dangerous, and just behave sensibly. That was my order, was it not? You solemnly swore, on your father’s honor and Simeon’s. And yet, no sooner had you said those words than—”

“I obeyed your order to the letter. If an entirely baseless suspicion has been cast on the one I love, then working to clear his name is a matter of course. It’s the duty of his fiancée, in fact. What about that is problematic? In what way is it not the most sensible course of action in the world? Of course, being sensible, I also know better than to do anything reckless like trying to capture the criminal myself. What I had in mind was not dangerous at all—just information gathering, nothing more.”

His Highness laughed, a low rumble. Glowering, he bent over until his face was so close that our chins almost collided. His dark eyes stared into mine from mere inches away. “Miss Marielle, I believe that in common parlance, such an explanation is what’s known as...talking out of your arse.”

“Oh my, what a vulgar thing for a prince to say! You could just call it splitting hairs.”

“Do you have no self-awareness at all!?” His Highness balled both his hands into fists and began to box my ears.

“Ow! Stop! That hurts!”

“Foolish girl! Take this, and this, and this!”

“Ow!” I wailed. “You’re supposed to be a prince! Raising your hand to a woman like this is the lowest of the low! No wonder all your relationships fall apart!”

“Don’t pick on something I’m sensitive about! And I’d never raise my hand to you if you weren’t such a tomboy!”

“Lord Simeon! He’s bullying me because he’s jealous of my successful love life!”

“I’m the one being bullied! You’ll make me cry!”

Lord Simeon closed his eyes in the face of this tempestuous scene, while the knights standing in the room watched us with awkward half-smiles.



Lord Adrien's head darted about in fear. "Is it...really all right to let this go on?"

Lord Simeon sighed and said, "Your Highness, that's enough."

"You're too damned lenient on her, Simeon! I don't care what anyone says, you're soft! You can't just let her do whatever she pleases!"

"You're rather lenient on her as well, Your Highness. And you, Marielle... Watch your tongue. You're being disrespectful."

His Highness finally released me. I became slightly sullen at being told off. I rearranged my disheveled hair and sat down on the chair His Highness pointed to.

The room we were in was a lounge with glass sliding doors facing onto a private garden. On the other side of the glass, daffodils and daisies bloomed, presaging the other flowers that would soon follow. Both room and garden had a comfortable, low-key atmosphere that felt tasteful rather than extravagant.

All my palace visits so far, for balls, tea parties and audiences, had been confined to the public areas of the palace—the rooms used for official business. This was His Highness's own personal space, which held his sleeping quarters, his office, and numerous other rooms besides. This one palace was vast enough even to encompass an entirely separate area like this, where no one but family could enter without permission, and it was possible to completely isolate oneself from outsiders. It was the ideal place to hold a secret conversation.

The serving girl who had brought tea immediately left, and the royal guards left to keep a lookout outside the door. Once the room was firmly cleared of unnecessary eyes and ears, His Highness and Lord Simeon finally explained what was really going on.

"...In other words, you were already aware of the plan to frame Lord Simeon before it even occurred? Did you have a 'snitch' who tipped you off from the inside?"

"I'd rather you didn't use such common language," said Lord Simeon, chiding me without a moment's delay. His facial expression was exactly as it ever was—to an irritating degree. It wasn't the look of someone currently being treated as

a suspect in a serious investigation. He sat next to His Highness as imposingly as ever. “Where on earth did you learn such a vulgar word as... Well, never mind. There certainly are people in the other military branches who are willing to help us. Even the navy and the army don’t consist solely of people who are antagonistic towards the royal guards. We are all working to protect the same kingdom, after all. We do socialize with one another. Certain members of the navy with a more positive view of us saw that Commander Kastner and those around him were acting unusually and warned us to be careful.”

I replied, “Shouldn’t they have dealt with him within the navy, in that case?”

“It’s not that simple, I’m afraid. They lacked any hard evidence.”

“And you intentionally played along with the enemy’s plan in order to get the required evidence?”

Lord Simeon kept silent for a moment and took a sip of tea before answering. “It’s inconceivable that Commander Kastner is operating alone, so it became imperative to find out who he was working with. The ‘evidence’ that implicates me is inside information that really was shared with Easdale, so he must be cooperating with someone who was able to get their hands on that information. If I was arrested, I thought, he might begin to act more conspicuously in order to try and ensure I was found guilty. The plot also seemed likely to be connected to the high-level leak we’ve been investigating for some time now. We consulted with the Captain of the Order and decided to act as though I had been successfully framed.”

Naturally, Captain Poisson knew about the situation as well. Lord Simeon would never act without permission. He’d probably even discussed the topic with His Majesty the King.

I pouted. *I can’t believe he’d forge ahead with a plan like that and not inform me or his family!* Then I noticed a detail in his explanation that I’d almost overlooked. *Wake up, Marielle!* My lack of sleep had severely blunted my ability to focus. I shook my head to try and fend off the drowsiness. “Hold on a moment. The ‘evidence’ you mentioned—you’re referring to the papers that were found in your study, yes? It sounds as though you knew of their existence before you were even accused of the crime.”

“Yes, that’s right,” he replied. “I knew how my foe intended to spring their trap, so I waited and made preparations.”

Lord Adrien’s face distorted into a picture of bewilderment. “What? But... S-Simeon, how could... What on earth are you...”

“I could see that the document box was deeper on the outside than on the inside. I realized there had to be some sort of false bottom mechanism, and when I investigated, I found the hidden papers.”

Lord Adrien’s mouth fell open. He was stunned into silence.

My eyes narrowed. It was impressive indeed that he had discovered this secret by just looking at the box, but after worrying about him to such an intense degree, I felt so bitter that I was unable to praise him.

Lord Adrien cradled his head in his hands and groaned, “You...already knew...”

His belief that he had been responsible for the accusation hanging over his brother’s head had driven him to tears—and all along, his brother had known everything and been nonchalantly using the situation to his own advantage.

Yes, I could understand Lord Adrien’s frustrations very well. I was sure that he wished, much as I did, to shout at the top of his lungs: *What about my anguish?*

But even under the weight of my caustic gaze, Lord Simeon did not yield an inch, remaining entirely composed. “Of course, they wouldn’t have instigated a search of my home without adequate grounds to suspect me, so I knew they would engineer a situation where I could be arrested. And of course, the most reliable option was for me to be caught in the act. Knowing that I was likely to be placed in such a situation rather soon, I quietly positioned knights around me to keep a lookout whenever I was going anywhere isolated or secluded. It was no great surprise when we saw that I’d been set up to be approached by a known spy. Conveniently enough, the military police arrived on the scene and arrested me, loudly pronouncing that I had been caught red-handed leaking official secrets. Those military police, too, were Commander Kastner’s accomplices, of course. We have already investigated their backgrounds. At any rate, the arrest warrant surely came from those associated with him.”

He explained the details in a manner that felt matter-of-fact, even lethargic. It was just as Countess Estelle had said—there really had been no reason at all to worry about Lord Simeon. His grandfather had taught him to repay what was dealt to him in spades, and here he had done just that, reading the enemy's plan and stealthily preparing to strike back.

His mother had indeed known him best, and I felt a great deal of respect for her. *I thought I understood Lord Simeon, but there's still a great deal for me to learn. I'll devote myself to it, so please, teach me your wisdom, oh wise mother-in-law!*

And, even having found the papers hidden in the box, it seemed he hadn't suspected Lord Adrien in the slightest. *Well, I suppose no one would think this man capable of such a scheme.* He was very much like a puppy, showing both affection and antipathy by rushing at you with his whole body. Suspecting him would be laughable.

Lord Simeon, too, strongly conveyed the impression of being honest and direct, but this strategic side came to the fore sometimes as well. In those moments, he was the black-hearted military officer all over. Vexing though it was, I couldn't help finding him devilishly attractive for it. *Good heavens, why must I be fangirling over him while I'm so annoyed with him!*

His Highness opened a large envelope and withdrew some documents and letters. "These were the papers found in Simeon's study by the military police. Forgeries in a close approximation of his real hand, and replies from Easdale. It's obvious to us that these are forgeries, but it's not so certain that a third party would notice the fine differences, so we secretly took these and replaced them with more obvious forgeries of our own, in order to bolster the case for Simeon."

Looking at the pages, the handwriting did closely resemble Lord Simeon's. However, a correspondence from Lord Simeon would always extend precisely to every edge of the paper. He would never write like this, with uneven line lengths and smudges on the page. The tails of letters also flicked up more enthusiastically.

Still, it indeed seemed like these details might not be persuasive on their own.

To prove Simeon's innocence, you would also have to collect other evidence or witnesses. That would no longer be necessary, since the replacement forgeries now held by the military police were far more obvious.

He gave me only a fleeting view of the pages before putting them back in the envelope. Regardless of who had written them, the contents included genuinely confidential information that he couldn't show an outsider.

"Which means," His Highness continued, "Simeon has already been cleared of all suspicion. However, we're keeping this top secret to give us a chance of catching Commander Kastner and his cohorts—the real leakers, in other words, who got their grubby paws on this information and shared it with Easdale. The only ones who know about it outside of this room are Captain Poisson, His Majesty, and a handful of people personally involved in the investigation. As such, the two of you need to be *extremely* careful. You absolutely must not tell anyone, even your families."

In response to this strict command from the crown prince himself, Lord Adrien gulped audibly.

His Highness's dark eyes stared fixedly at me. "In particular, Miss Marielle, you must not use this as material for your writing, now or in the future. If you disobey *this* order, you'll find yourself being unceremoniously thrown in jail." The stern confidence disappeared from his face. "Though, knowing you, you'd use even that as an excuse to gather information. You'd be there scribbling away inside your cell. Simeon, what *would* be an effective punishment?"

"You needn't worry," Lord Simeon replied. "Even when she gives in to her worst fangirl excesses, Marielle will hold her tongue when it comes to information she knows she must not share. It's Adrien I'm worried about. He's very bad at keeping secrets. If it's something he can't even tell our family, he'll start acting very suspiciously around them. I'm wondering if it might even be better to lock him away for now."

"B-but, Simeon!"

"I leave it in your hands," said His Highness, flatly ignoring Lord Adrien's protest.

Sensing that the conversation would be wrapped up shortly, I hurriedly said,

“I accept the order. You’ve explained everything, and I’m reassured about the situation, so I promise I won’t do anything to interfere with the investigation from now on. Only, I wish you had told me this from the start. If you had, I wouldn’t have acted on my own.”

“It’s information we weren’t able to share with outside parties,” His Highness replied.

“Even so, isn’t it only natural that I’d do my utmost when I didn’t know Lord Simeon wasn’t really in danger? I didn’t get involved simply to amuse myself. I was backed into a corner. You talked as though I was the only one in the wrong, but would it truly be impossible for you to speak even one word of apology, Your Highness?”

“Marielle!”

I had criticized His Highness right to his face, so Lord Simeon’s reprimanding voice hit me like a whip. I glared at him as well.

“And you, Lord Simeon. You just said yourself that I’m able to keep a secret, and yet you didn’t open up to me at all. Do you not in any way believe that your secretiveness is what led to this turn of events?”

“When it’s related to my duties, there’s certain information that I cannot share. It’s not a matter of how much I trust you.”

“Yes, indeed, I understand that. I’m not suggesting there’s anything wrong with that. I’m merely asking you not to treat me as solely and entirely at fault in this situation. I was not told anything, and thus I did not know anything—and so, in turn, I did my very best to handle the situation in my own way.” Tears began to well in my eyes. “It’s too much for it to simply end with me being berated and told that my efforts were unhelpful and a waste of time! Is what I did really so wrong!?”

Lord Simeon immediately replied, “If you would just—”

“Calm down, the pair of you,” His Highness interrupted, as the fervor with which Lord Simeon and I raged at one another steadily increased. He put a hand in front of Lord Simeon and turned to me, taking a breath. His voice became remarkably gentle. “You’re right, it is indeed just as you say. Though the

circumstances may have been what they were, I'm still sorry that we made you worry. No one thinks that your efforts were a waste of time. We understand that you were simply doing your best to help Simeon."

His entirely reasonable tone left me surprisingly deflated. I fell silent. It felt very much as though I was being handled like a child. *Yes, his phrasing was just what you'd use for a child who was having a temper tantrum. Is that how I appear? Am I no more than a child with no sense and no understanding of anything?*

Rather than becoming more angry and offended, His Highness had taken the stance of an adult and sympathized with my feelings. I couldn't simply complain endlessly; I had to make an attempt to understand the feelings of those I was complaining at as well.

And, now that I thought about it... At no point had either of them said that my efforts were unhelpful or a waste of time. I had been told not to concoct any "problematic plans," but I sensed now that this had been meant less as "don't interfere" and more as "don't do anything dangerous." Neither Lord Simeon nor His Highness had accused me of interfering in the investigation, but rather of putting myself in danger. They'd been speaking out of concern for me.

With a slightly cooler head, I realized at last that the situation wasn't as outrageous as I had thought. There was no need for me to have responded so angrily.

A number of thoughts followed from this. Though I couldn't help feeling somewhat dissatisfied, it was not a case of my worries and hard work being completely disregarded and laughed at. *Lord Simeon and His Highness had no choice but to deceive me. If I want them to forgive my actions as well, I need to come to terms with that. That's probably the more grown-up way to view this.*

His Highness continued, "We made a poor choice in how to approach the situation. You're not the sort of young lady who will simply wait at home crying, so we shouldn't have expected we could simply give you an order and then abandon you."

He directed this at Lord Simeon, too. Now Lord Simeon adopted a thoroughly apologetic face—toward His Highness.

His Highness was able to sympathize with my feelings, but Lord Simeon still prioritizes His Highness over me. Perhaps that's simply a matter of course? I understand it, but it still leaves me feeling somewhat lonely. Is it selfish to think that?

“Honestly speaking,” His Highness added, “I didn’t expect you’d ever get so close to the heart of the matter so quickly. I didn’t think we’d given you nearly enough information. How the devil did you know about the masquerade ball? If you were a man, I’d ask you to work for me.”

“Don’t even jest.” Lord Simeon said this bluntly, without even the slightest smile.

He still did not offer any words of apology to me whatsoever. Why? Was it related to his honor as a man? Or was it that this would mean acknowledging that His Highness’s judgment had been wrong? Was he unable to lower his head to me in front of everyone else? *And if so...is that something I’m supposed to simply accept?*

Rather than merely dissatisfied, I began to feel sad. Still, I couldn’t keep grumbling forever after His Highness had apologized like that. I took a deep breath, bowed my head, and expressed the thoughts that had been churning around in my head. “I’m terribly sorry for causing such a fuss. I deeply apologize for my inappropriate manner of speaking to you.”

“No harm done. As long as you understand now, let’s put it behind us.”

“One last thing, however. It’s about something I saw last night. Lord Simeon, did you notice who Commander Kastner was sitting with?”

Lord Simeon furrowed his brow slightly. His expression seemed to suggest some irritation or disappointment that I was still talking, which only made me sadder. I didn’t mean to complain further, or to meddle in the investigation. I just needed to ask this because it would be terrible if he really had missed out on some critical information. If he already knew about it, then it was fine.

Receiving no answer, I went on. “The man who was killed—he was part of the group sitting with the commander, was he not? That doesn’t necessarily mean the commander was responsible for his death, but it did seem exceptionally suspicious. And the man in the white mask... I still don’t know who he was, but

I'm fairly sure it's someone I've met. I have a feeling I've seen someone who carries himself with a similar bearing. He's probably a nobleman."

Lord Simeon remained silent, so I steeled my nerves.

"And...there was one other person. Lady Rose was with them."

Even at this, Lord Simeon did not twitch even slightly. Instead, His Highness asked, "Rose? Rose Bellecour?"

It surprised me a little that he had been the one to reply. "Yes, undoubtedly. Lady Rose was sitting with Commander Kastner."

"Undoubtedly, you say." With a sigh, he looked at the ceiling and thought for a moment. Then he turned away from me—to the door leading to the next room—and said, "Very well, then. Rose, come in."

"What?" *Lady Rose is on the other side of that door? What does that mean?*

The door opened before my eyes, and she walked in, her heels clacking with every footstep. Dressed in men's clothes, her exceedingly feminine body radiated a unique charm. Her short hair danced above her shoulders. She looked at me with her sunrise-colored eyes and smiled.

"Rose is on our side," said His Highness. "She's wormed her way into the commander's good graces in order to investigate his movements."

Rose stood next to the knights on duty. A beautiful woman in men's clothing, lined up with the men in royal guard's uniforms—it somehow emphasized her cross-dressing even more strongly.

Entranced by the beautiful person before me, I answered rather stupidly, "Wormed..."

"Rose's mother is Easdalian, you see. In fact, she divorced Rose's father and returned to Easdale. It's the perfect pretext. Why wouldn't the commander believe she has a strong connection to Easdale?"

I couldn't make heads or tails of His Highness's words. I understood the individual meanings but they didn't make sense together. Lady Rose had infiltrated the enemy? Gone undercover, so to speak?

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Lord Adrien's look of shock as well.

Glancing at Lord Simeon, however, I saw no hint of his composed expression giving way to any degree of unrest. The eyes behind his glasses did not falter at all.

It hurts. I feel as though my heart has been stabbed with a shard of ice.

“Oh,” I managed. “I see.”

“Sorry for causing you confusion,” said His Highness, “but there’s really nothing to worry about on that front.”

“Understood. I apologize for my impertinence.”

His Highness had gone out of his way to call Lady Rose in because I’d shown such dissatisfaction at not being told anything. There was no need for him to apologize for that, and yet he still spoke kindly to me. I nodded, pushing down the pain and turmoil in my heart.

“As for the masked man... It’s entirely likely that he’s the man pulling the strings—the one we’ve been after all along. You said that you recognized him, Miss Marielle? I don’t suppose you’d be able to recall who he was?”

Apparently reassured at my lack of further objections, His Highness expressed his hopes regarding the comments I’d made. I held my emotions at bay and tried my hardest to remember. *If only I could give him a clear answer. At least then I’d be acknowledged as having done something useful.* But, since the man had concealed his body so thoroughly, I honestly had no idea who he was.

“I must apologize. All I know is that I don’t believe he is a member of the armed forces.”

“I see.” His Highness looked disappointed, but he didn’t persist in asking me any further.

Instead, he just said that he would like me to tell him if I remembered anything, and drew the conversation to a close. I refused the offer to be escorted home right away, instead replying that I would go and see Princess Henriette first. Lord Adrien was to be kept at the palace—it seemed likely that he indeed wouldn’t be allowed to return to his family home. However, rather than being upset by this, he appeared overjoyed at being allowed to stay by his dear brother’s side.

Lord Simeon emphasized that I shouldn't go wandering about all over the place, but did not say anything further. I left the room alone, with a sidelong glance to confirm my suspicion that Lady Rose would be remaining there.

I walked along the mostly empty corridors of the palace's private area with heavy footsteps. My head and heart felt as though they were made of lead.

I happened upon one of Princess Henriette's ladies-in-waiting and asked if the princess was available, but it seemed she hadn't yet returned from a tea party. Since I hadn't made any sort of appointment, I gave up on visiting her after all. I considered asking the lady to pass on the gift I'd brought, but she seemed so put out by my inquiries that I thought better of it and went straight back to the carriage instead. Dejected, my shoulders sagging, I stood before the carriage ready to climb inside.

Just then, a nearby voice called out to me. "My word, what an unusual place to see *you*!"

I knew whose voice this was—this singsong tone, overflowing with confidence—before I even turned around and saw her. She was a rose blooming in a glorious sunlit garden. A magnificent golden rose. Her tresses reflected the sun's rays and shimmered as dazzlingly as real gold. Her eyelashes were long and luscious, and her eyes were akin to precious emeralds. Her red lips were formed into a tight smile.

"Good day, Marielle. What an adorable dress. The color of a dandelion, I'd say. A common weed that grows everywhere. How well that suits you! Though I must say, I can scarcely imagine what you're doing here. This is the royal family's residential quarters. Entry is permitted only to select individuals. It's not a place for the likes of you to enter as you please."

This first-rate beauty walked briskly toward me and looked me up and down as she spoke. When she caught sight of the carriage behind me, she knitted her luscious golden eyebrows.

"Should I understand that you are about to ride in this carriage? Who invited you? You certainly weren't at the tea party with Her Majesty. The princesses were there, too, so they can't have invited you. And the only other person who could request the use of a carriage with the royal coat of arms on it would be...

But, no, it can't be..."

This beautiful person had spoken to me—had called me by name in such a familiar manner. Given how out of spirits I was, I simply couldn't keep my composure any longer. The dam broke and my tears began to flow forth. I leapt forward and embraced her, wailing, "Lady Aurelia!"

"What are you—!?"

As I embraced her, a floral scent wafted over me. The scent of roses, of course. Though her slim frame should have made it easy for me to wrap my arms around her, her bountiful bosom gave some resistance. *She feels so soft, and smells so good. This tender warmth is easing my wounded heart.*

"Ohh, Lady Aurelia!"

"Wh...what are you...? Stop this at once! It's entirely too presumptuous!" The queen of high society, the proud flower blooming beautifully wherever she went, daughter of Marquess Cavaignac of the esteemed House Cavaignac, grabbed onto my shoulders and tried to tear herself away. "And why are you crying!? You always react with such foolish indifference, as though you don't even understand my cutting remarks!"

"Oh, no, Lady Aurelia! Your insults are second to none! They enthrall me! You take pride of place as the preeminent villainous young lady in Lagrange's royal court!"

"Villainous!? Now it's *you* who's insulting *me*!"

It would have been unforgivable to sully her magnificent dress, decorated with the finest lace, so I took out my handkerchief and wiped away my tears. Still blubbing, I said, "Thank you so much for coming and talking to me. Hearing you speak just as cuttngly as always is truly a blessing."

"I don't understand what you're getting at. Why would that be a blessing?"

"It makes me feel more like myself, as though I've returned to my normal, everyday existence. Whenever I see you, you're always brimming with such beauty and confidence. It gives me a reassuring sense that you'll never, ever change—not until the world ends."

I saw Lady Aurelia's temples throb. "You seem to be praising me, and yet I feel strangely offended." *Ahh, when she makes that face, she becomes the very essence of what a beautiful woman can be. The picture of an outraged queen.*

I recalled that Princess Henriette's lady-in-waiting had also mentioned a tea party. *So she was busy at this tea party thrown by Her Majesty the Queen.* If Lady Aurelia had been invited, did that mean the queen was once again seeking marriage candidates for Prince Severin?

Lately, His Highness seemed rather interested in my friend Julianne. He had asked me to introduce him to her several times, and I was currently unsure as to what to do. Their difference in status was too vast, and in any case, Julianne didn't seem the slightest bit interested in him. She wanted to be a rich old man's second wife.

"So, why were you crying, anyway?" asked Lady Aurelia, regaining control of herself. "You're usually so carefree and optimistic. It's your only saving grace."

I was moved once again. "Thank you for being concerned about me, Lady Aurelia!"

"Don't be so absurdly exuberant! I'm not concerned about you or anything like that, so don't misunderstand my intent! I merely wish to know who managed to make you cry when sarcasm and insults never have any impact, and you remain unaffected even when physical force is employed! Yes, whoever that person is, I'm highly impressed. I want to praise them for a job well done."

"Now that I think about it, we've known each other for quite a long time, haven't we? We didn't meet regularly until after I made my debut in society, but we saw each other once in a while as children."

"I don't remember that at all! I can hardly notice every individual person at gatherings so all-encompassing that even the children of inferior houses are in attendance. And a child who doesn't even participate in conversation, but simply stuffs her cheeks with sweets? Of course I wouldn't remember her!"

Lady Aurelia had been dazzling—and popular with the boys—ever since she was a child. Now that she was twenty, she had no end of willing suitors. In fact, as a young lady so beloved by the gentlemen of society, she probably knew far, far more about their inner workings than I did. Meeting her here suddenly

began to feel like fate. I decided to ask her opinion. “For old time’s sake, as my childhood friend, could you grant me some advice about men? Are they...unable to apologize to women? No matter what the situation?”

“Kindly refrain from calling me your friend! Why should I play along with your request!?”

“Is it a mistake to want him to apologize? For a man, is bowing his head to a woman nothing but a humiliation?”

“What?” She paused a moment. “Well, there certainly are many such men in the world. They inherently look down on women, firmly convinced in their belief that men are superior, thus possessing not one shred of awareness that they could ever be the one who is in the wrong.”

I didn’t think Lord Simeon was that kind of person. He was fair and open-minded, and often judged himself more harshly than anyone else. He had a righteous purity about him, whereby if he ever thought himself in the wrong, he was not shy about apologizing at all. He’d always acted that way before, even toward me.

So why was he being so rigid this time? Why had he berated me and expected me to apologize while offering nothing in return? Could he not have apologized for causing me distress, if nothing else?

As I reflected on this frustrating question that I ultimately had no answer to, Lady Aurelia interrupted with a loud snort of laughter. “Of course,” she continued, “women who allow themselves to be manipulated by men are even more worthless than the men themselves. A good woman will have men naturally wanting to prostrate themselves before her. Instead of fussing about every little detail of a man’s behavior, polish yourself to be as beautiful and noble as you can be. Then your target will have no choice but to be enchanted by you, and he’ll do everything you say. Merely complaining that he’s being too cold or selfish is the same as shouting from the rooftops that you yourself are lacking the power to control men.”

She lifted her ample bosom proudly and brushed away a strand of golden hair.

“Oh my,” I uttered. She truly did look like a queen. Even I wanted to prostrate

myself before her. “Exactly the confidence I’d expect from the golden rose of high society. You’re so incredible, Lady Aurelia. You do have an awful lot of men devoted to you like that, don’t you.”

“Ohohohoho!” she laughed. “Of course I do. Before me, all men are obedient puppies!”

Well, there are men like Lord Simeon and Prince Severin who aren’t swayed by her, but I suppose that’s a matter of personal compatibility.

She chuckled. “Perhaps it’s an unreasonable expectation for a weed growing by the side of the road. Still, even dandelions can be decorative in their own way.” She looked at me. “The dress isn’t too disastrous, I suppose, but can’t you do *something* about those glasses?”

“If I took them off, I wouldn’t be able to appreciate your radiant good looks.”

“Overall, you’re simply far too lacking in allure. You always look like a child, with no splendor or polish. You should try to exude more of a grown-up aura.”

“Grown-up? Oh... So, perhaps I really should expose a little...more?”

“Hmm... With you that might not have the desired effect.”

Somehow, both of us had ended up focused on my chest. *Ugh, I’m so jealous of Lady Aurelia’s deep cleavage.*

“Revealing clothing isn’t the only option, in any case. You can also change your hair and makeup, or... Wait! Why am I helping you, anyway!? Deal with it yourself!”

Just as Lady Aurelia resumed her usual attitude, I heard voices approaching from inside the building. Two women, chatting animatedly. For them to be speaking so loudly, they couldn’t be ladies-in-waiting.

They stopped nearby, and one said, “Oh, Lady Aurelia. Still lingering in the palace?”

They were around my age, and their stature, hair color, and facial features were so similar that it was immediately obvious they were twins. When I remembered which house they belonged to, it reminded me of a certain other person as well. My heart was suddenly astir.

“Good day to you both,” replied Lady Aurelia. “Be sure to get home safely.” She spoke curtly and standoffishly, as though she had no interest in talking to them.

They ignored this and came over anyway. “Such a wonderful tea party today, wasn’t it?” said the other sister. “Her Majesty and Their Highnesses spoke to us so much, my heart is still racing. I’m quite sure I’ll be dreaming about it tonight.”

“Indeed,” Lady Aurelia replied, “it looked like something far, *far* beyond your wildest dreams.”

“Whereas you must be quite used to it,” said the first sister. “You’ve received such invitations many times, haven’t you? At the tea party, you certainly seemed like a regular.”

The conversation full of smiles and hidden barbs glided back and forth above my head. *I see. Those two are acting all high and mighty because they think one of them might be chosen for His Highness’s hand, and they’re being disdainful toward Lady Aurelia, who has been put forward as a candidate many times but never been chosen. Awfully brave of them to speak to a marquess’s daughter like that!*

“Good day,” said the second twin at last. “Take care, Lady Aurelia.”

The twins triumphantly got into their carriage and left. Right up to the end, they had not registered my presence. *Perhaps they thought I was Lady Aurelia’s maid.*

As soon as their carriage had disappeared into the distance, Lady Aurelia said, “Hmph! Such conceited behavior for the daughters of a mere baron!” She practically spat out the words, suitably offended at that provocation from young ladies of such a low-ranking house. “They were only there as seat warmers! Imagine, putting their stupidity on full display like that. They truly think they were invited as plausible candidates! The very idea that someone of their caliber would be chosen to be His Highness’s bride! If they gave the slightest thought to the difference in rank, it should be obvious even to them! Who do they think they are!?”

I wonder, though. Could the queen have changed her approach? She had

already explored every avenue when it came to the highest-ranking young ladies inside and outside the kingdom, including princesses of other nations. Had she decided to expand the scope to include lower-ranking houses? And if so, could Julianne be accepted as well? Her house, too, was a barony, even if it was rather less influential than that of the twins.

Lady Aurelia continued her rant. “Just because their family has a modicum of wealth doesn’t mean there’s anything special about them! What fame does their house have? What noted achievements does it have to its name? Their mother is a commoner, for goodness’ sake! They are *entirely* lacking in the suitable background for marrying into the royal family!”

I didn’t understand the queen’s intention in inviting the two girls, but Lady Aurelia seemed convinced that they had only been there to make up the numbers. As nonchalantly as I could, I asked her a related question.

“Speaking of which, their father, Baron Bellecour, inherited his title when his older brother passed away. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, indeed. He married a commoner and fathered those two, never imagining that such a thing might happen. Then a stroke of good fortune meant they could begin calling themselves the daughters of a baron. Still, they hardly have the status befitting of the royal court! Those two dunces appear to have quite forgotten their origins!”

I had seen the baron and his wife very recently, at the wedding reception I’d attended with Lord Simeon. In the small world of the nobility, sometimes you found unexpected connections here and there. The twins who had been so haughty to Lady Aurelia just now were Baron Bellecour’s daughters.

His older brother, the former baron, had died slightly before I entered society, so I didn’t have any direct knowledge of the circumstances. When I’d asked my brother and my mother, they’d told me that Lady Rose was the former baron’s only daughter, which made the twins her cousins. These closely related women had been in the palace on the same day, at the same time, but with two entirely different purposes. The twins had no way of knowing, but I wondered if Lady Rose knew.

It appeared that Lady Rose had been readily accepted as part of the team

working on the investigation. I was glad that it turned out she had not betrayed Lord Simeon—that she was not an enemy, and that there had been no need for me to fear Lord Simeon being hurt by her. I was pleased about that, I really was, but alongside my relief, a different seed of doubt and discontent was beginning to take root.

Lord Simeon and His Highness had both told me to do nothing, to simply wait patiently, but they had asked Lady Rose to help. I had only tried to blend into my surroundings and gather information, but she was working undercover—a far more dangerous position to be in. Worming her way into Commander Kastner’s inner circle and watching him up close would be a dangerous duty even for a man. She was a woman, just like me, so why were we being treated so differently? *Does Lord Simeon really trust Lady Rose that much?*

I took in Lady Aurelia’s expression with a sidelong glance. She was still breathing heavily through her nose. With a studied air of indifference, I asked, “The former baron left a daughter behind as well, I believe. Do you know her at all, Lady Aurelia?”

“Ah, yes.” She nodded. “There was a daughter, wasn’t there? But I wouldn’t exactly say I know her. I never really spent any time in her company. She stood out in society somewhat, so I know her name and her face, at least. Rose, I think her name was? I never thought much of her, I must say. She had something resembling good looks, but nothing to write home about. I hear she was good fun at parties, however—the type who drew men’s attention very successfully. As I recall, there were quite a few rumors circling through society about her various love affairs.”

“What happened to her after her father died?”

Lady Aurelia brushed off the question apathetically. “Who knows? I certainly don’t. She disappeared from society, and I haven’t seen her at all since. I haven’t heard she got married, either, so perhaps she was forced into a convent somewhere.” She spoke with a matter-of-fact tone and without any hesitation. The rather heartless-sounding words didn’t mean that Lady Aurelia was cold or unfeeling, though, as this was something that happened frequently. “I can’t imagine the new baron would have wanted to pay a dowry for his niece. And what worthwhile marriage could he have arranged for her while forcibly taking

away her inheritance and fortune? If he didn't put her in a convent, perhaps he married her off as the second wife of some wealthy commoner or other."

The legitimate heir to the barony was, in fact, Lady Rose. She should have inherited the title and become Baroness Bellecour. However, a woman with no backing was powerless. If she was married she would have been protected by her husband, but Lady Rose was alone. With her mother back in Easdale, having already divorced her father, she probably had no one to turn to and couldn't oppose her uncle. Typically, the fate of a woman in that situation was just as Lady Aurelia had said.

Lady Rose had said she wasn't married, and it didn't look as though she had gone to a convent. I wondered what she *had* done after her father's passing.

"Yes, those girls may be the daughters of a baron, but they *stole* that title from Rose!" said Lady Aurelia indignantly. Her anger toward the twins had arisen once again. "How dare they try to throw their weight around after committing such a despicable act. To be so conceited to think that one of *them* might become crown princess! It's beyond foolish."

Indeed, their personal history really did make them seem entirely unsuited to the role. Perhaps rather than inviting them to make up the numbers, Her Majesty envisaged them as potential friends for the eventual crown princess? The crown princess's requisite hangers-on, in other words. Despite their background, they certainly had financial means. Perhaps the queen was thinking of how she could take advantage of that.

"Though I must say, Rose herself is also rather worthless, letting her birthright be stolen from under her nose. After spending all that time in the company of all those men, not one of them stepped up to help her. It must mean she wasn't truly loved by any of them after all. There are plenty of men who would throw everything away for my sake, but I suppose she didn't have anyone half as devoted as that. In the end, she was just another woman letting herself be manipulated by men."

Despite her earlier indignance, Lady Aurelia concluded on a triumphant and self-satisfied note. No matter what, she never lost her confidence and optimism.

I decided to offer the gift I had intended for Princess Henriette to Lady Aurelia instead. “I appreciate you letting me ask your advice. I’ll definitely take it into account. If you don’t mind, I’d like you to take this as a token of my gratitude.”

“I wasn’t trying to give you advice, you know!” She paused. “What is this? *The Young Lady’s Lies*? By Agnès Vivier!? Her mysterious, rarely seen debut work!”

Lady Aurelia’s cheeks flushed to a rosy shade of pink. Though she made a comment that she only knew about the author because the princesses liked her books, it was obvious from her expression that she enjoyed the books herself. Though she always seemed so strong-willed and ill-tempered, even Lady Aurelia was a young maiden with dreams. She adored romance stories, as most people knew, I was sure. It was quite adorable that she tried so hard to pretend otherwise. *Thank you for being so joyfully appreciative, Lady Aurelia!*

I said my goodbyes while she was still staring transfixed at the book. After I got into the carriage, the driver quickly closed the door and set the horses trotting toward my home.

I closed my eyes and surrendered to the rhythmic shaking of the carriage. After everything I’d seen and heard that day, I was rather worn out. In my sleep-deprived state, I soon began to doze off. Half-dreaming, I thought about that beautiful woman in men’s clothing.

Lady Rose had once wanted for nothing, but her position in society had been cruelly ripped away from her. Not one of the gentlemen who had enjoyed her company had stepped in to help. Was Lord Simeon one of those men who had abandoned her?

That couldn’t have been the case, of course. Lord Simeon would never leave his lover to her misfortune. He wasn’t the kind of person who would coldly abandon a young lady with no one else to turn to. *Which means...they can’t have been lovers.* Realizing that soothed my heart a tiny bit.

But it did indeed give her exactly the right pretext for pretending to ally with the commander. She could easily have convinced him that she harbored a grudge against Lord Simeon. With her connection to Easdale as well, she really was perfectly suited, just as His Highness had said.

And yet, it was still incredibly dangerous. She was still, undoubtedly, a feeble

woman, not a big, strong man. Why had I been told that I mustn't do anything, while Lady Rose was accepted as part of the investigation team?

Lord Simeon had said that I was a young lady from a noble family that had exercised great care in raising me. I'd lived a life free of hardship, not knowing any misfortune, and been able to pursue my hobbies to my heart's content. My family was kind to me, and I'd even been blessed with a wonderful fiancé.

Lady Rose, meanwhile, had faced great adversity and probably suffered a great deal. There was no doubt a vast difference in the amount of knowledge and experience we had.

Was that why there was such a difference in the degree to which Lord Simeon trusted us?

Chapter Nine

For a few days after that, I received no word from Lord Simeon, nor did I hear any rumor of what had happened next. I was privy to no information whatsoever and could do nothing but wait.

Even when I bought a newspaper in the city, I found that nothing had been printed about this case whatsoever. There had never even been any mention of Lord Simeon's arrest. The silence was so complete that one couldn't help but think the authorities were responsible for it. In all likelihood, nothing about this incident would ever be publicized.

That wasn't especially unusual; there were plenty of cases that were dealt with in their entirety without the public ever knowing. This was also a plot point seen in many stories. Still, not even seeing the slightest news, even about the general situation, made the days tedious and left me feeling sad and alone.

I know that Lord Simeon is all right, so at least I don't need to worry about him. But...when will I be able to see him again?

With no word from Lord Simeon, I continued the wedding preparations without him. Today I'd been summoned to House Flaubert to check the list of invitees for the reception. My family did not have too many people to invite, but House Flaubert had an impressive range of acquaintances, so the number of guests was rather large. Any careless omissions could cause offense, so I devoted myself to looking over the list of names with Countess Estelle.

"I believe it's fine now," said Countess Estelle, finally putting down the list, which was so long you'd think we were inviting every noble in the country. "Still, there might be some more names to be added later, so let's leave plenty of leeway in the other preparations."

It truly was an imposing sight. In pride of place at the top of the list was the name Severin Hugues de Lagrange. Even after becoming so familiar with him recently, seeing His Highness's full name written down made me keenly aware once again that he was a prince.

The next names—Auguste Chaliar, Jean-Baptiste Brassiere and Maurice Lunaire Silvestre—were also impressive, being three dukes in a row. These were the sorts of remarkable people being invited to my wedding reception. I still couldn't quite believe it.

His Majesty wouldn't attend, of course, but Prince Severin also served as his proxy, so it was as though the king was halfway invited. It spoke to House Flaubert's power and influence.

I tidied away the slightly terrifying list of names and sat down. As we took a breather, exhausted after all that work, a maid brought tea for us.

Her eldest son was (as far as she knew) in custody, and her second son couldn't return home either due to some flimsy excuse, but Countess Estelle did not show a hint of being perturbed by any of it. Instead, composed as ever, she talked about the ceremony and the reception. Wondering if and when I would ever be like her, I tried asking her about the advice I'd received from Lady Aurelia.

"Exude a grown-up aura?" She leaned over toward me with a satisfied smile. "Goodness, so you've finally worked up the enthusiasm for that. It's a positive sign. By all means, dedicate yourself to that endeavor. Bewitch that stubborn mind of his and make him a little more human."

"Oh no, I don't want to bewitch him. Besides, I think Lord Simeon is more than human enough."

"Oh? Well, admittedly I do find it somewhat sweet that he finds joy in your unsophisticated look because he doesn't like his fiancée being noticed by other men. Still, if possible, I would prefer him to become a better man."

"Better?" I could scarcely imagine what a better man than him would be like.

"Absolutely. Being proud of his gorgeous wife, showing her off at every opportunity, making the other men jealous—and making his wife so enthralled by him that she'd never look further afield. That's a proper man. Always being timid and afraid that someone will steal you away? That seems rather juvenile to me."

"I see." Her greater life experience had certainly given her a different

perspective. I hurriedly jotted down her words in my notebook. “Does the earl enthrall you like that, Countess Estelle?”

She paused. “He’s a strange man who finds rocks more beautiful than human women.”

Panicked at the slight chill in the air, I hastily withdrew my question. It seemed the men of House Flaubert had the common trait of neglecting their wives and throwing themselves into their work.

She whispered something to the maid, who left, then soon returned holding a tray with numerous small bottles on it.

“Changing your look is a good start, but it seems that dresses and makeup don’t elicit much of a reaction from Simeon. For an obstinate person like that, it’s best to attack with smell.”

So the bottles lined up before me were perfume bottles. Though this was a normal part of a noble lady’s beauty repertoire, it still surprised me that she had this many kinds.

When I said so, she replied, “Of course I have so many. There are fragrances designed for certain situations: day or night, tea party or dinner party or ball, and so on. Sometimes I combine several for a specific effect, and I even choose based on who I’ll be seeing, or on the particular mood I’d like to convey. Being able to use them in a way that effectively suits each scenario is part of being a fully fledged adult woman. A beginner would typically start with *eau de toilette*, but why don’t we jump straight in with *parfum*?”

“Already?”

“You want to be more grown up, don’t you? Then you’ll need to choose one that thoroughly conveys the impression you want.”

“I’m not sure. I don’t know if Lord Simeon likes such strong scents...”

Amongst all the types of fragrance, *parfum* was the most highly concentrated and strongest smelling. It was difficult to use, and could be quite unpleasant to those with sensitive noses. I feared that with Lord Simeon, it would repel him rather than appeal to him.

“If you put the tiniest bit, just one drop, underneath your dress—on your lower back, or between your thighs—you can keep the scent restrained so that it doesn’t become overpowering. You mustn’t put it on right before meeting him, of course. Apply it about one hour earlier.”

The countess selected a small bottle from the tray.

“This one will be suitable. I see it as the ace up my sleeve. It’s perfect for your particular goal.”

I took the bottle she offered me and drew my nose close to it without taking off the lid. “It’s a floral scent... No, it’s made of several scents mixed together, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It’s a specially blended aphrodisiac.”

“Aphro—!?” Upon being told that so frankly, I almost dropped the bottle to the floor.

The countess laughed in a pleasant, high-pitched tone. “What are you so shocked at? That is what perfume is for, is it not? So use it to reel Simeon in properly.”

“Y-yes, ma’am.”

“At first it has a gentle scent of flowers and fruit, but after that you get the notes of musk. Even a thoroughly obtuse man like my son will be vulnerable to an attack on his sense of smell. However, applying too much will be worse than none at all, so you must use only the very smallest of quantities.”

A partitioning screen was placed around me, and I was stripped of my dress and even my undergarments before the tiniest amount of *parfum* was applied to the small of my back. At that moment I could make out the scent, but when I put my clothes back on, I couldn’t detect it at all.

“That’s all you need. Soon you’ll be able to smell just the faintest trace.”

The countess gifted me the small bottle. The pale rose-colored glass had a crescent moon engraved on it, the mark of a well-known shop called Clair de Lune. I stared intently at the moon in my hand.

Who on earth is the “moon” that Olga referred to?

Someone dangerous. Someone I mustn't get too close to. That seemed like it could describe whoever was pulling the strings behind the commander. But who was it? I tried to remember a house that used a moon in their family crest, but there weren't any. And if not something as straightforward as that, then what *did* the moon refer to? The opposite of the sun? Something round? Or perhaps a slender crescent moon instead, shining splendidly in the night sky?

The more I thought, the less I understood. I wished I could ask for more hints.

Even if I didn't know specifically, I still had a sense. It seemed likely to be the masked man who had been sitting with the commander at the masquerade ball. His body had been thoroughly concealed, with not a single strand of hair left visible. One could only assume he had a reason for wanting absolutely nobody to know who he was. It seemed that even Lady Rose, who was working undercover, had not discovered his identity. If she had, His Highness wouldn't have needed to ask me.

I was sure I remembered him. *If only I could think who it was...*

I recalled the scene in my mind and tried to reel in the threads of my memories. His movements were so graceful and relaxed, quite unlike the brisk and energetic motion of someone in the military. He was like moonlight wavering on the surface of a body of water.

Suddenly I felt as though I'd latched onto something. I had the feeling I'd seen what I was searching for, just for a moment. I tried to chase after it—but before it took form, it disappeared into mere ripples. Like the moon reflected in the water, it appeared to be there, but I couldn't grab hold of it.

Sighing, I gave up for now. *Maddening though it is, I suppose there's no need for me to focus on this so hard anymore.* Neither Lord Simeon nor His Highness were seeking my help. My task was to wait for Lord Simeon's return and continue preparing for the wedding. A woman's work is protecting her home; she leaves the work outside of the home to the men. She mustn't encroach on the men's territory. Though it did leave me feeling somewhat desolate, that was the common wisdom of society.

After leaving the Flaubert residence, I went directly into the city. I sent the carriage home without me and strolled around idly. I had only intended this as a

simple diversion, but before I knew it, I realized I had stopped in front of a familiar hotel.

This was where we dropped off Lady Rose and Lord Francis after their arrival at the port. I wonder if they're still staying here.

I feared that if I saw Lady Rose now, my envy would become shamefully obvious. It would also be risky for her to meet me when she had been entrusted with the perilous duty of investigating undercover. Better to avoid her for now.

But what about Lord Francis? I wouldn't mind seeing him quickly. But I suppose at this hour, there's a strong possibility that he's busy working.

I stood there for a moment, indecisive, before ultimately turning around, ready to walk away from the hotel without going inside. I didn't want to risk causing any kind of misunderstanding by inappropriately spending time alone with him. That could be quite troublesome for him as well.

But before I had walked a step, I heard a familiar voice behind me. "Miss Marielle?"

I turned and saw Lord Francis, who had just walked out of the hotel. He was wearing his usual plain attire and holding nothing but a black bag. Perhaps he was heading to work right now, I thought.

"Oh, Lord Francis. Good day."

His sudden arrival had made the decision for me. I wasn't sure if it was good timing or bad. I supposed it wouldn't be too inappropriate for us to stand and chat outside, having happened to bump into each other.

"Good day," he replied, walking over to me. "What are you doing around here?" He looked around. "Are you alone?"

"Yes. I came into the city to do a bit of shopping. You're still staying here, I see?"

"Well, yes. I don't have anywhere else to go, after all."

I'd intended my comment as innocuous small talk, but I'd accidentally provoked a self-deprecating remark from Lord Francis.

Noticing that I was lost for words, he apologized awkwardly. "S-sorry... I

suppose Simeon didn't tell you?"

"Oh, well..." I frowned, wondering how much I could say. Lord Simeon had in fact told me rather a lot about Lord Francis's background.

"No need to be overly polite," he said. "Everyone knows about my mother being Gandian." He smiled kindly as he spoke, but his attitude toward the subject did not come across as especially cheerful. His smile held a shadow.

"My apologies. I was considering how best to reply, that's all. Is your mother still in Gandia?"

"Yes, and my sister, too. When I was fourteen, we moved there as a family. My father and I came back to Lagrange once in a while, but my mother and sister have never left Gandia since then."

"And your other relatives in Lagrange?"

"They've long since cut ties with us. It's not something that happened recently. It started when my mother and father got married."

"Oh..."

So that's why he had nowhere else to go. Lord Simeon had mentioned something about this in particular. He'd said that most of Lord Francis's father's family had cut off all contact. It seemed that "most" was actually an underestimate.

"It's such a shame," I continued. "It's so wonderful that two people of different classes and nationalities could be drawn to one another, and then be joined together in matrimony, overcoming all the differences in their cultures and values. It's like destiny. What a shame that there are so many people who can't accept such things."

"That is the reality of the world, I'm afraid. It's not like a play or a novel. For the nobility, someone from a colony is even lower than a servant."

I was taken aback by the terribly detached and emotionless way he spoke about it. He maintained an unruffled expression, but I could see the somber coldness in his dark eyes.

"But not everyone sees it that way. Lord Simeon and the former Earl Flaubert

weren't prejudiced like that, were they?"

It was so sad to have to face such discrimination. I wanted to believe that not *everyone* was so unfeeling. Lord Simeon and his grandfather really had interacted with Lord Francis without prejudice—and his father had been a Lagrangian nobleman, hadn't he?

But I feared that in thinking along those lines, I was being arrogant and presumptuous again. Still, surely others could at least see that Lord Francis himself was a fine, upstanding gentleman? And yet despite that, this country had been so up in arms about his parentage that it couldn't help hating him.

"I must apologize," I said after a moment. "That was quite presumptuous of me to say."

"No, it's me that should apologize. I shouldn't trouble you with my problems. You're right, Simeon never bullied me or looked down on me. He was always very strong, and very fair and impartial. He was a fine young gentleman—entirely beyond reproach. Even the types who liked picking quarrels with me shied away when he was around."

Lord Francis's expression softened, as though he was looking fondly into the past. A broad smile spread across his face.

"Yes," he concluded at last. "I always admired him."

"I'm sure Lord Simeon would be thrilled to hear you say that. He actually told me he has a great deal of respect for you."

"Simeon? Respect...me? Never." Sadly, his smile turned rather sour at this point.

"It's true. He said so himself, directly to my face."

"But I haven't done anything to justify his respect. There are endless crowds of people who respect *him*, of course, but I don't have such admirable qualities. Respect? I'm not worthy of..."

"Lord Francis," I interrupted.

He stopped, apparently quite flustered at having let his feelings show, and said, "You must excuse me, I'm rambling about nonsense. You must be most

concerned about Simeon right now.”

“No, I—” I began, but then I cut myself short.

With a glance around to see if anyone might be listening, Lord Francis whispered, “What has happened since...you know?”

I paused before replying, “I still haven’t had any contact from him.”

“R-really? None?” he stammered. “Well, I’m sure he’ll be released right away! Something like that is sure to be some sort of misunderstanding.”

“Yes, indeed. Thank you.”

Lord Francis looked away from me, appearing quite restless. “Apologies, but I must be going.”

“Of course! I’m sorry for keeping you. Goodbye, then.”

“Yes, please excuse me.”

After exchanging our parting words, we went our separate ways. Lord Francis walked away at a fast pace, and I turned the opposite way as though that was the direction I intended to go. A moment later, however, I turned on my heel. Hidden by the bustling crowds, I secretly followed after Lord Francis.

I had a terrible feeling in my chest again. It was the same feeling I’d had just a few days earlier, when I’d suspected Lady Rose. In her case, the fear had been unfounded. She hadn’t betrayed Lord Simeon.

But Lord Francis...

Had he been careless, assuming I’d know too little to notice? He’d mentioned information that there was no way he should have known.

The fact that Lord Simeon was, officially, being held in custody had not been announced to the general public, and nor were any rumors spreading through society about it. It was information that a member of the general public should not have known about—so how did he? He wasn’t connected to the military, nor was he a government official. He was simply an employee of a trading company, even if it was state-run. Since the day I’d met him at the wedding reception, he hadn’t even gone to visit House Flaubert. And there was no way that Lord Simeon, who was so odiously stubborn that he hadn’t even told his

own fiancée, would have told Lord Francis purely because they were friends.

In theory he might have been part of the investigation team as well...but I dismissed this idea out of hand. If he was, there would have been no need for his attempt to pry more details out of me.

How and why does he know about this?

I bit my lower lip as I continued tailing him. I hoped that this, too, would turn out to be a groundless fear.

After I had suspected Lady Rose and then learned the truth, I had realized there was one other person worthy of my suspicion. Lord Francis's circumstances were much the same as hers. He had also been in Gandia with Lord Adrien and gone out shopping with him. He was Lord Simeon's childhood friend, and would have known his tastes and habits. As a possible suspect for having set up the plan with the document box, he fit the bill perfectly.

Even so, I had hoped my suspicions were unfounded. He and Lord Simeon might have had some complicated feelings about one another, but despite all that, they had said they were friends. Those weren't superficial words; I had seen it for myself and firmly believed it.

That's why I had wanted to meet Lord Francis and confirm it for myself. I wanted to speak to him and reassure myself that I was indeed simply thinking too hard.

And yet, here I was.

I longed to press Lord Francis. To make him tell me why. Why frame Lord Simeon? When Lord Simeon was the one person who had understood him—who hadn't shown prejudice toward him.

Maybe he really did hate him, just as Lord Simeon had said. Had he seen Lord Simeon's behavior as hypocritical after all? But if so, why would he have maintained their friendship all this time?

I didn't understand. I wanted to catch Lord Francis right now and ask him what was going on. But I knew it was better to avoid doing anything rash. *If I speak to him and make a fuss about his small slip of the tongue, he'll explain it away somehow, and that will be that. No one else heard it, so there would be no*

way to prove anything.

First I had to watch his behavior and make sure of my suspicion. Was he simply going to work, or was he going to meet someone? Commander Kastner, perhaps? I'd find out and then let Lord Simeon know. I'd been told not to do anything, but I was sure sending a letter would be all right. *But who to send it to?* If I addressed it to His Highness he might not read it straight away, but if I directed it toward Alain, Lord Simeon's aide... *Yes, that would be best. Then I can leave whatever happens next in Lord Simeon's hands.*

I employed my specialist skill, blending into my city surroundings and hiding my presence so that no one noticed me there, and walked behind Lord Francis at a safe distance.

What a sad story, though, for someone Lord Simeon considered a friend to do such a thing...

I wondered how Lord Simeon would feel. Much like when I had suspected Lady Rose, my main worry was how Lord Simeon would take the shock. Or, knowing him, had he already noticed that Lord Francis was worthy of suspicion? When he'd seen through the plan involving the document box, had he already decided who must have been responsible for it?

I looked around Lord Francis to see if there was anyone who might be watching for me—and when I did, I noticed two men making their way through the crowds, approaching him in a manner that stood out as unusual.

They closed in on him from both sides, taking hold of his arms at the same moment Lord Francis noticed them there. It didn't look as though he was being arrested. The men's faces—only their faces—beamed cheerfully, and they linked their arms with his, almost as if they were three good friends in high spirits. Lord Francis's face became stiff. They dragged him over to a carriage waiting on the side of the road and pushed him inside.

What is happening here?

I was certain it wasn't an arrest by the official authorities. That wasn't something they would need to carry out in such a furtive manner. *He's probably being kidnapped...isn't he? What on earth is going on!?*

All I knew was that I had to follow them. The moment the carriage set off, I ran to a fiacre that was waiting for passengers nearby. “I need you to follow that carriage!” I said to the driver, pointing.

“What’s this, madam?” he replied, a quizzical expression on his face. A moment later, he began to laugh suggestively, having evidently misunderstood the situation. “I see, I see! Planning to catch your boyfriend *in flagrante* with another lady?”

“Perhaps. I’ll pay you double, so follow them without being noticed, all right?” I hurriedly took some money out of my handbag and handed over the normal fare as an advance payment.

The driver laughed, a fearless glint in his eye. “Go on then, get in! This old geezer won’t abandon a young lady in need!”

“How wonderfully dramatic! Thank you!”

I climbed in and we set off at once. The driver followed after the kidnappers’ carriage without losing them for a moment.

As we turned corner after corner, the streets began to narrow. We were fast approaching the more working-class area of the city. I no longer recognized the sights flying past the window. If we kept going this way, we’d soon enter a decidedly unsavory district. I’d almost never set foot here despite my frequent trips into the city. I began to feel quite uneasy.

I have to keep following them, and see where they take him. But...then what?

After that, there was not much I could do on my own. Even if I alerted the police, I wasn’t sure they’d take me seriously. It was one thing for a woman or a child to be abducted, but if I reported a grown man being taken somewhere by two other grown men, there was a high chance they would treat it as some sort of private disagreement rather than a matter that warranted their attention.

There really is no alternative but to let Lord Simeon know. But will simply sending a message and then washing my hands of it really be all right? As I wondered who the criminals were and why they had kidnapped Lord Francis, my worries only grew. He didn’t look as though he had much money, and while his work in Gandia might have often put him in harm’s way, there was no

reason he would meet with any work-related danger in this country. I didn't know Lord Francis especially well, and there might have been some other circumstances peculiar to him that I wasn't aware of...but I couldn't help thinking this must have been instigated by Commander Kastner.

Only, if Lord Francis had arranged the plan with the document box, he should have been one of the commander's allies. So then, why would the commander have taken him captive like this?

Is it happening again? The same thing that happened the other night?

In my mind, the memory of the pool of blood overlapped with an image of Lord Francis. I clutched my chest tightly.

Lord Simeon... What should I do?

The carriage began to jostle more violently. The condition of the road beneath us was steadily worsening; we had entered a particularly rough part of the city. The driver was not prioritizing comfort, so I began to feel rather as though I'd had one too many drinks. I almost felt ill by the time the carriage with Lord Francis inside finally came to a halt.

"They've stopped, madam," came the driver's voice.

I looked through the window, trying not to show my face too much. "Keep going, please. Drive past them slowly."

I watched as Lord Francis got out, his arms still tightly held by the two men. As my carriage drove forward, I crouched out of sight to avoid their notice. Once we were past them, I looked out again. They were taking Lord Francis into a building. I asked the driver to stop, then got out.

"This building... Can you tell me what it is?"

"This? It's a gambling den. And a brothel, too," he said, stroking his chin and adopting a tone that suggested he felt very sorry for me indeed. "He might be doing more than just having a bit on the side, madam. The men who go to this sort of place are ne'er-do-wells and scoundrels. I'm telling you this for your own good—get as far away from him as you can. Mark my words, he'll be swimming in debts and women of ill repute. He's trying to fleece you."

So, a gambling den. But I doubt they've come here purely to have a good time. Looking around, the street had an entirely indecent air about it. It seemed an ideal place for scoundrels to hide their illicit activities.

I asked the driver to tell me the building's address, then ripped a page out of my notebook and wrote a short letter. I rolled it up tightly and tied it with a ribbon, then handed it to him along with my second payment.

"Take this to the palace, please. As quickly as you can. It's urgent."

"What!? The palace? You can't be—"

"Give it to a member of the Royal Order of Knights called Alain Lisnard. And if he's not available, then..." I hesitated, then nodded to myself. "Give it to Captain Poisson."

"No, no, listen, madam. You're asking the impossible. If I go anywhere near the palace, I'll be chased away by the gatekeepers."

"Don't go to the front gate, but to the Bonheur gate instead. It's the service entrance on the west side used by the royal guards. Then there'll be no problem."

He grunted in frustration. "But...you must understand..." He looked down at the letter I'd pushed into his hand and the money that accompanied it. He frowned deeply. No one ever traveled to the palace in a fiacre, so he'd probably never gotten close to it before.

I asked him as resolutely as I could manage. "Please. I included a postscript asking for you to be paid a reward upon receipt of this letter. If you deliver it, you'll receive a hundred algiers."

"A hundred..."

It was probably more than he could expect to earn in a whole day. Upon hearing that he'd earn such a sum from just one errand, his expression changed.

"That was the Bonheur gate, and...a man named Alain, yes?"

"Alain Lisnard. If you tell him Marielle sent you, he'll know who you mean. Please, deliver it as quickly as you can."

“Alain Lisnard. Marielle. Understood. But...what are you going to do? This is a dangerous place for a well-to-do young lady like yourself. If you stay here alone, the thieves and kidnappers will snatch you right up.”

“Hmm, I see what you mean.”

I hadn't intended to come to this downtrodden area, so I was still wearing one of my usual dresses rather than any sort of disguise. No matter how much I suppressed my presence, I'd never be able to blend into the scenery here. The occasional passersby were already darting their eyes toward me.

Just as I was looking to see if there was anywhere nearby I might be able to hide, another carriage drove up and stopped nearby.

This can't be a coincidence, surely. Another carriage stopping in such an unusual place?

The carriage's window opened, and a pair of honey-colored eyes looked down at me. The man smiled teasingly.

“Oh,” I uttered, letting my surprise show.

A black-haired boy of fourteen or fifteen descended from the driver's seat and opened the door. This boy, who appeared to be the man's valet, then waited beside the open door and lowered his head respectfully.

The man stepped down from the carriage. Today, as ever, he was wearing a high-class and impeccably tailored gentleman's suit. “Are you in some sort of trouble, young lady?”

His voice, flowing as sweetly as honey itself, tickled my ears like music. Enchanted by his gaze, I unintentionally whispered, “Mr. Miel...”

“*Miel?* Are you calling me ‘Honey’?” He arched his eyebrows in amusement.

“Oh dear!” I exclaimed, slapping a hand over my mouth.

He chuckled softly. “It seems I'm the beneficiary of a rather sweet nickname.”

I stammered, “Sorry, I didn't mean...”

How terrible! I said it aloud! I'd associated the color of his hair and eyes, and his liquid sensuality, so strongly with honey that I'd begun to call him that in my

mind.

He was, of course, the enigmatic golden-haired man I had encountered several times now. His soft curls shone as beautifully today as ever. The color of his skin reflected his southern heritage, though with his confident air of nobility, it did not seem remotely at odds with his Lagrangian-style clothing. Though his manner was somewhat haughty, I felt no unease around him; was this because his eyes drooped slightly in a manner that seemed so kind?

But I could no longer see it as happenstance that we had met so many times. *For him to appear before me in a place as specific as this... It must surely mean he's been observing my movements.* I asked him, "Do you have some need of me?"

He had begun to approach me, but my obvious guardedness stopped him. "I thought I might be of service to you, that's all. Or is my assistance not required?"

"Assistance?"

"You've been following the man who was taken inside that building, yes?"

Where on earth had he been watching from? I twisted my mouth sullenly. "Now why exactly would someone from Easdale wish to assist me?"

"Oho." His honey-colored eyes sparkled mirthfully. "And what makes you think I'm from Easdale?"

"You speak Lagrangian very well, but you do have a very slight Easdalian accent. Besides, I'd never have overlooked such a memorable person in Lagrangian society."

A barely detectable hint of admiration appeared on his face. "Interesting. So the tomboy who marches to the beat of her own drum has the expertise of a true noblewoman as well. You must have been raised very well to perceive such a minute difference."

"I'm sure the young noblewomen of Easdale are capable of the same. Elocution and good deportment are the fundamentals of a lady's education."

Typically, one of the greatest struggles for young ladies of the middle class

marrying into the upper class was their pronunciation. Even though we all speak Lagrangian, the way the language is used varies greatly depending on one's class. Learning a language from birth and then having to learn it again, almost from scratch, was no easy task. There had been notorious cases of ladies who made every effort to dress suitably, yet still betrayed their origins as soon as they opened their mouths. This premise was often used in bullying scenes in stories.

The children of noble families, however, had beautiful pronunciation thoroughly drummed into them. As such, they mastered the ability to distinguish those fine distinctions among classes as well. Discerning Lagrangian spoken by a foreigner was child's play by comparison.

"Hmm. And you can't trust a man from an enemy nation, is that right?"

"Enemy? We're on friendly terms with Easdale, are we not? In any case, I hardly think you're in league with the criminals I've been chasing. If you were, you wouldn't behave in such a roundabout manner. You'd be better off simply taking me captive right away."

In response to my plain and direct statement, his expression grew slightly twisted. "I could be another kind of evildoer entirely. What if I were to abduct you right now and take you out of the country?"

His tone was that of someone poking fun at a child. I lifted my chin haughtily. "I wouldn't be so terribly upset. A man like you sets off my creative urges. Observing you at close range would provide fodder for all sorts of wild ideas. It's Julianne's birthday soon, so I could turn you into a story that I'm sure she would love."

He paused a moment. "I suddenly have a decidedly uneasy feeling." His smile disappeared and he looked away.

See? I'm not a child . I know enough to know that you don't have that sort of ill intention. I didn't know who this man was, but I could tell he didn't mean me any harm. He kept appearing around me, almost as though he was stalking me, but I didn't feel any unease. I certainly didn't think he was seeking me out with any inappropriate purpose in mind.

Would Lord Simeon berate me for being naive, I wonder? Still, I do take some

pride in my own aptitude for human observation. I'm sure I'm not wrong.

"And you really intend to help me?" I said, stepping toward him. He was very tall indeed. Even taller than Lord Simeon. "It's likely to be dangerous. Will you be able to protect not only yourself, but me as well?"

"You intend to go inside even though you know it will be dangerous?"

"I'm calling for support, but I don't know whether it will arrive in time. It could be a matter of life and death. I have to try and save him."

To look up at his honey-colored eyes, I had to crane my neck up so far it began to hurt. He stooped down slightly, perhaps having noticed my struggle.

"Even though he deceived the one you love? Is someone like that truly worth saving?"

So he knows everything. For a moment I had a slightly desperate thought that he might be the one pulling the strings after all.

"I'm not the one who can answer that," I replied. "I just don't want the worst to happen while I still don't know the background that led to it. I want him to explain himself properly and apologize."

He stood up straight again and laughed. "You're a brave young lady, and a reckless one. And very kind. Just as he said."

"Excuse me?"

"Very well, I agree to your request," he said placidly. "With that settled, however, I must ask you to follow my directions. If you start rushing ahead on your own, I won't be able to keep you safe."

I nodded, smiling, then turned back to the driver who'd brought me here. "Please, hurry to the palace."

He had been watching this exchange. He looked at me and the golden-haired man with a dubious expression. "Are you sure, madam?"

"Yes. You needn't worry. However, that letter is a matter of great urgency, so...please, as quick as you can!"

"I must say," said the driver, "I can understand the appeal of a man who

appears just when you're in trouble, but don't let yourself be deceived by a handsome face. You should choose a man based on how reliable he is. That's the best way to be sure."

"Pardon me?"

"Well, I'll be off! Leave it to this old geezer ! I'll deliver your letter quick as a flash! I'll call forth the knights to punish that no-good man who betrayed you!"

Leaving me with that heartening proclamation, the driver set his horses racing. The carriage sped off into the distance with a rattling sound.

So he still thinks I was chasing a cheating lover. Well, that's all right.

The golden-haired man laughed. It was almost a purring noise. "Lagrangians certainly are friendly." He appeared not to be angry at the implication that he was an unreliable man deceiving women with his face. "Anyway, you'll be no good dressed like that. Go inside the carriage and switch clothes with the boy."

He began to usher me inside. I looked over at the young valet, and his eyes met mine. He exhibited no shock at this sudden order, instead remaining expressionless.

"Arthur," said the man, "help the lady change her clothes."

"Certainly, master," said the boy, readily accepting the order and lowering his head.

I couldn't agree quite as readily. "No, I, you see... Even if changing my clothes is unavoidable, it's a little inappropriate for a boy to help me do it. I'll manage on my own."

"Taking that dress off by yourself looks like hard work," the man replied. "Couldn't he at least help you unfasten the back? Also, I fear it would also be rather unfair on Arthur to turf him out of the carriage with no clothes on."

"Oh, I..."

Admittedly, in order to provide me with his clothes, he would have to temporarily strip to his underwear. One way or another, we would have to be in the carriage together while changing.

"My lady," said Arthur, "I'll turn my back while you're undressed. If that

would still bother you, I don't mind being blindfolded."

He spoke unemotionally, without even a smile. He appeared not to be affected at all. I began to wonder if I was being excessively self-conscious. *But surely not. Anyone would be perturbed by this situation, I think.*

Still, it seemed nothing I said would convince them. *Fine, go on then. It's not as though I have much to show him anyway!*

I steeled my nerves and let out a breath. "Then let us proceed."

Chapter Ten

The sun was still high in the sky, but already the inside of the gambling den was full of loitering drunkards. The thick tobacco smoke and stench of liquor made the air so unpleasant that I thought I might choke.

“Ugh...”

It was hard to cope with after being jostled around so much on the journey. I truly began to feel ill. I stayed close to Mr. Miel’s back to shield myself from the smoke as best I could. The scent wafting from him made me feel slightly better; the gentle fragrance of musk and *bois de rose* conveyed a grown-up sense of calm reassurance.

I had tried asking his name, but instead of telling me, he had simply said, “Mr. Miel will do.” I decided I would spite him by taking him at his word and openly treating that as his name. *But why doesn’t he want to tell me his real name, I wonder? Is he the sort of person whose background would be immediately recognizable just by knowing his name?*

His noble appearance meant all eyes were on him from the moment he entered. Gambling was a pastime favored by upper-class men, but they frequented their own gentlemen’s clubs. They wouldn’t drag themselves to a gambling den in the run-down outskirts of the city. To the patrons, he was a foolish rich man who had let curiosity lead him astray. In their eyes, he was prey.

But he continued to stroll in as though he wasn’t at all concerned. I followed him closely, peering around the room. Swarms of people around various gaming tables raised cheers and angry roars. In an area that appeared to be set aside for resting or enjoying a little food, men drank liquor served by women whose tops were cut so low as to be thoroughly indecent.

I did not for a moment forget the real reason I had come here, but it was also a long-awaited chance to see this sort of venue from the inside. I etched the scene into my memory, eager to bring it to life in a future work.

Mr. Miel turned to glance at me, laughing. "You don't seem to be trembling at all. You're made of strong stuff."

"Thankfully, you stand out so much that no one is paying any attention to me."

I'd changed into a serving boy's clothes, removed my makeup, and tied my hair back. Still, I'd been slightly worried that it would be obvious I was a woman, and that this might make me conspicuous, but this fear had been completely unfounded. Removing my corset and covering my chest with a waistcoat had made my meager assets virtually invisible. It seemed none of them suspected that I wasn't really a boy. Though I should have been glad of that given the situation, it still pained me rather a lot.

When Lady Rose dresses in men's clothes, she doesn't lose one ounce of her feminine allure...

But because it was so vexing, I decided to revel in it. *I am a boy. I am a valet.* I told myself this and subdued my presence just as I always did, then simply followed Mr. Miel's lead. Wearing men's attire was so comfortable. It was so much easier to move around without a skirt or any bulky accessories to get in the way. *I can understand why Lady Rose dresses like this! I could definitely get used to it.*

The only awkward detail was that the clothes were slightly too large. I hadn't expected this since Arthur and I were roughly the same height, but when I put on his clothes, the arms and legs had been slightly too long. Especially troublesome, however, were the shoes, which were far too big. We accounted for the smaller length of my feet by stuffing the shoes with handkerchiefs, but there was still so much extra space on the sides that it was hard to walk in them. *I suppose even very slender-looking boys are bigger than they seem!*

At a glance, Lord Francis did not appear to be in this room. Since the gambling den served as a brothel as well, there were rooms for that purpose on the second floor. He had most likely been taken to one of those.

Hmm, what would be the least suspicious way to get to the second floor...? But when I looked over at the ladies of the evening standing in the room, the thought that had floated into my head quickly disappeared. *No, no, no, no, no.*

That is QUITE impossible.

No sooner did I think that than they came over to us.

“Goodness, what a handsome young man,” said one to Mr. Miel. “Are you a nobleman from abroad?”

“So dashing!” said another. “I’ve never seen such beauty in a man.”

Hmph! Admittedly Mr. Miel is extremely handsome, but he doesn’t beat Lord Simeon on that front!

“Spend some time with me, Big Daddy!” said another of them.

“Leave him alone, you old hag!” said yet another, turning on her competitor. “Big Daddy? You’re older than he is!”

“You leave him alone, you ugly cow!” came the retort.

“But younger is better, right?” said yet another of the ladies. “If so, I’m the youngest one in the place, guaranteed!”

The small crowd of heavily made-up women accosted Mr. Miel unreservedly. As they clung to his arms and pressed their abundant bosoms against him, my own heart began to race. *Such wonderful cleavages... And they’re squeezed against him so tightly!*

But even while swarmed by the boisterous women, Mr. Miel remained unruffled. He smiled as calmly as ever and spoke to them with a beguilingly mellow voice. “I’m looking for a different kind of excitement than the usual. I suspect you would be able to show me a good time as well, but first I’ll play a game or two. Will they let me in for a round of cards, do you suppose?”

As he asked, he looked toward a table where several men were playing cards. They returned his gaze, some with annoyance, and some rather eagerly. *The former must really hate a man who attracts the ladies so effortlessly.*

Wait, I thought suddenly, now’s hardly the time for a game!

I stared at Mr. Miel with an intense look of protest. He turned to me only for a second and rebuked me with his eyes. *Ugh... I know I promised to do what he said, but what could he be planning?*

He moved over to the card table, acting as though the ladies were dragging him there. The men already playing made no objection to his joining the game; rather, they were practically licking their lips at the sight of this easy target.

I hope things don't go awry here. I've heard it's common for people to be swindled in places like this. We might be stripped of all our possessions!

I felt like sighing, but held back. Mr. Miel passed me his cane to hold for him. It was remarkably heavy. *You'd almost think it had a metal core! Wait, could this be...*

While I was preoccupied with the cane, Mr. Miel sat down and the game started. One of the women moved to stand behind him, but I asserted myself and stood in between. *This is my right as his valet!* Not that I had any idea how I could prevent any trickery at the gaming table.

The woman glared at me, but I glared right back, and she stepped aside with a haughty sniff. As she did, I caught a brief glimpse of the group of people sitting just behind me and caught myself just before crying out in surprise.

Flustered, I turned to face the table again. Mr. Miel had just picked up the cards he had been dealt. I pretended to look at them while focusing all my attention on the men behind me.

"Damn that rotten brat!"

I heard a *thud* of one object hitting another. A liquor glass being slammed down onto a table?

"How in blazes did he manage it, the cur? I thought we'd put all the suspicion on him! He was even arrested! But since then it's been a complete botch job. What the devil is going on!? The clock keeps ticking and there's *still* no announcement that he's been found guilty! And the papers are dead silent. Even that gossip rag La Môme hasn't printed a single sorry word about the case. The nobility aren't even gossiping about it! How have they kept it this quiet!?"

The man's voice exploded with anger and hatred that he made no effort to conceal. None of the men or women frolicking nearby turned and looked, however; they were evidently used to such scenes. Trusting the fact that a handful of voices would be drowned out by the larger commotion going on all

around them, the men behind me unloaded all their resentment.

“It wasn’t meant to go like this. I’ll bet he used his influence, didn’t he? That humorless royal guard brat. Gah, if that dimwit didn’t have his lineage and his good looks, he’d have nothing!”

I knew who they were talking about without needing to ask. Even so, I wanted to point at them and ask who on earth they were talking about. *He has all kinds of incredible qualities besides his face and his house, I assure you! He’s the world’s strongest, most heroic and most devious man —the black-hearted military officer who fuels my fangirl fire more than anyone else! Who are you calling a dimwit!? You’re in no position to say that, you red-mustached dullard!*

Yes, sitting directly behind me was Commander Kastner. He was not clad in his naval uniform, which only made his distinctive facial hair stand out even more. I didn’t know if the men around him were his naval subordinates or others who were part of his plot, but among them I saw Lord Francis’s kidnappers as well. *So that was indeed the commander’s doing.*

So that was why Mr. Miel had come to play at this table. Upon realizing that, I returned my attention to the game for a moment and saw that he was dragging a pile of coins over to his side of the table. *Goodness, he won.*

“Things might be looking dicey for us,” said another of the voices behind me. “We can’t get in touch with Lazare or Désirée, and the others don’t even know what happened to them. They’ve been quietly taken into custody, I reckon.”

Commander Kastner merely grunted in frustration.

The previous voice continued, “The investigators have stuck their noses into the military police as well. A bunch of them have been moved over to a different case.”

“Dammit!” yelled the commander, and another *thud* echoed.

It sounded as though Lord Simeon and His Highness were slowly but surely tightening the noose. The tables had turned on the group who had tried to pin a false accusation on Lord Simeon. Now they were the ones being chased and backed into a corner. Even though I was facing the other way, I could sense every bit of their frustration.

“Are we safe?” asked one of the men.

The commander huffed. “Them being arrested has nothing to do with us. What crime did I commit? All I did was get a tip about some dirty dealing and share it with the relevant parties. What he was arrested for was making contact with a real spy. All we did was pass on the information . They can’t arrest us for that.”

It seemed the commander had merely laid the preparations for Lord Simeon to be caught in a trap, without doing anything directly. It was possible that those personally involved in arresting Lord Simeon and searching his home had known nothing detailed about the plot. They might not have even been aware that the commander had orchestrated it.

Lord Simeon had mentioned that there was no hard evidence of the commander’s involvement. In order to get his hands on the required evidence, he had pretended to fall into the trap, then proceeded with a secret investigation. Even with the benefit of Lady Rose’s help, perhaps he still hadn’t found anything that let him commit to making an arrest.

Excited cheering erupted around me, and the clinking of coins echoed. Mr. Miel had won again.

“We already dealt with Paillard,” said the commander behind me. “All we need to do now is dispose of the Gandian half-breed upstairs and there’ll be nothing left tying any of this business to us.”

His words gave me a fright. *“Gandian half-breed”? That can only mean Lord Francis! And the one they’ve already “dealt with,” Paillard... Was that the man killed at the masquerade ball?*

The very thing I’d feared was fast becoming a reality. Dread began to take hold.

“So you’re definitely going to do it?” asked one of his men.

“No other choice,” the commander replied. “If it hadn’t come to this we’d have just sent him back to Gandia and left it at that, but he’s got too much of a guilty conscience. We can’t let him give anything away. Not that I think he’d ever have gotten too big for his britches like Paillard and tried to blackmail us.”

I heard a great exhalation, and the smell of smoke drifted towards me. It seemed the commander had lit a cigar.

“Still,” he continued, “if the brat saw through the trick with the document box, there’s every chance he’ll have traced it back to the half-breed. If we don’t deal with him soon, we’re setting ourselves up for a fall. We haven’t heard anything from *you-know-who* for a while, either. I think he might have deserted us.”

“*You-know-who*”? My breath caught in my throat and I desperately fought the urge to turn around. *The man pulling the strings behind the commander. The one Lord Simeon really wants to reel in!* More important to Lord Simeon than the false accusation was the leaking of official secrets. That was, no doubt, why he was letting the commander walk free for now. If I could hear the man’s name here, it would be a huge lead.

I concentrated as hard as I could, not letting a single word slip by. The commander grumbled about all sorts of things, but ultimately never mentioned who “you-know-who” referred to. He didn’t even say anything that hinted at the man’s identity. Listening to the conversation, I had the sense that perhaps the commander himself didn’t even know who he was.

Had all their interactions with him been just like at the masquerade ball, where he’d covered his entire body? Had he kept his name and background a secret from them as well? If he’d made the commander aware that he, too, had a grudge against Lord Simeon, then perhaps the commander hadn’t gone out of his way to try and identify the man. Nobles engaging in petty squabbles with one another was an everyday occurrence, and hidden intrigues in high society were commonplace. It might have been enough for the commander just to know that the masked man was someone with a strong objection to Lord Simeon.

I bit my lower lip. I’d gotten so close, just one step away from catching him, and he’d slipped through my fingers again. In my mind, I saw that white mask sneering at me.

Whoever he was, he had sought out the man who most wanted to frame Lord Simeon, provided the sensitive information to be used for laying the trap, then

watched from the shadows as the fire blazed. He hadn't shown himself even once, so if things looked risky for him, he could simply leave the commander to his own devices. *Cowardly, if you ask me!*

But don't underestimate me, masked man. I will find out who you are. I will catch the moon! In my determination, I grasped the cane in my hand tightly.

Another round of cheering pulled my attention away. A mountain of coins sat in front of Mr. Miel now. Had he won yet again? Was he really that good? It was too much! Or had the other players let him win? Were they lulling him into a false sense of security, planning to fleece him in the next round?

With a lethargic tone, Mr. Miel said, "Dear me, it's rather boring not to have any competition. I'd feel sorry to take any more of your money, so I think I'll call it a day." He tossed his cards into the table.

But his opponents weren't so keen for him to leave. "Quitting while you're ahead?" said one, putting a hand on him. "Seems stingy to me. Let's play one more round."

"Yeah. This is where it starts getting interesting."

If Mr. Miel stopped now, having beaten them repeatedly, they'd have lost rather a lot, so of course they were invested in convincing him to rejoin the game. But he stood from his chair nonetheless. "My apologies, but I don't think I'd derive any further enjoyment from playing. I'll have more fun with the ladies here."

He turned his head to look at the women who had been watching the game, and immediately an argument broke out as to who would be his bedfellow. Leaving them to it, Mr. Miel took his cane from me, then called over an employee and asked them to exchange his coins for notes. He gave the immense roll of banknotes to me, leaving me at a loss as to how I should carry it. It wouldn't fit into my bag or my pockets. There was no choice but to simply hold it in my hands, so I continued to do so and followed Mr. Miel.

With an arm around the woman who had won the fierce battle, he headed toward the staircase. I was entirely unsure whether it was appropriate for me to keep going, but I certainly couldn't wait downstairs alone. Besides, once we reached the second floor, we would be able to look for Lord Francis. I made for

a spectacular third wheel as I accompanied them. *In any case, Mr. Miel can't really be intending to hire her services...can he?* Even if he was in such a mood, this was hardly the time to be enjoying oneself.

The men Mr. Miel had been playing against glared at him with a very unpleasant look in their eyes. As we ascended the stairs, I became aware that they were slowly and quietly rising to their feet.

Mr. Miel continued carrying on an upbeat conversation and did not turn around at all. *I'm sure he already knows, but...I can't help feeling uncomfortable about the situation.*

We reached the second floor, where doors lined the corridor on the left and right. In total there were six rooms. *Is Lord Francis in one of them?* Commander Kastner had said he was upstairs, so that seemed almost certain, but all the doors were closed. *Is there no option but to open each one individually and see?*

"This way!" said the woman, leading Mr. Miel to one of the doors. *Well, I can exclude that one at least.*

But before she could open the door, the card players showed their faces. They swarmed in, closing in on us as one band.

"Hold it right there," said one of the men. "We have rules here, you know. The fun and games come at a price."

"Don't think that just because you've won, you can cut and run with all our cash," said another.

Ah, I knew it. They're planning to strip us of all our possessions after all. It seemed likely they were aiming for Mr. Miel's wallet and the roll of banknotes I was holding.

"Excuse me," complained the woman. "Don't interfere with my trade!"

"Quiet, you! Out of the way!" replied one of the men in a threatening tone. The group continued to draw nearer to Mr. Miel.

"The game is over," said Mr. Miel. "A winner was decided, fairly might I add, and all I did was collect the money that was owed to me. What is wrong with that?"

“Hah!” laughed the man closest to him. “I don’t know what fancy noble house you’re from, but you made a mistake trying to walk in here as if you own the place. Hand over everything you’ve got, or it’s going to hurt, I promise you! And you, boy! Hand over the money!”

It was one thing for them not to have noticed my presence at all, but “boy”!? *Even when I’m right in front of your face, you still don’t know I’m a woman!?*

Mr. Miel stood between me and the men. “It’s going to hurt, is it? Like this, for example?”

Without exhibiting any additional fervor at all, Mr. Miel suddenly wielded his cane and hit the nearest man squarely in the side of his face. The man crumpled to the floor with a yelp.

“You bastard!” cried one of his cohorts. “You’ll regret that!”

Fueled by their anger, the whole group jumped at Mr. Miel, who pushed me further back as he dodged the flying fists.

I huddled next to the wall, drawing back from the fight that had erupted, and watched. Mr. Miel moved confidently, and his build was similar to Lord Simeon’s. It was evident that he was sure of his own abilities. In the midst of battle, he looked unlike either a disciplined military officer or the carefree gentleman he had always seemed before.

As expected, Mr. Miel was stronger than all of his attackers combined. He took them out with ease. Each one collapsed under the assault of his kicks and cane strikes. Each time one fell to the ground, a *thunk* resounded in the corridor. It became a cacophony that made me want to cover my ears. Mr. Miel appeared to be going easy on them, however, rather than simply knocking them out with one hit. As for the men, they were regular customers of this sort of place, so a few blows to the head didn’t put them off. Despite the blood that dripped from their faces, they stood up and came for Mr. Miel again and again.

Guessing Mr. Miel’s intention, I made myself as inconspicuous as possible. *He wants me to look for Lord Francis while the fight serves as a distraction.* Commander Kastner and his men were downstairs thinking this was a foolish brawl and nothing more, so they wouldn’t come to look. *I can save Lord Francis.*

First I leapt to the nearest door and peered inside. *Oh yes, this is the door that Mr. Miel was led to just now.* It was empty, so I made my way to the next one.

“Eeek!” came the cries from inside. The room was occupied! Happily ignoring the commotion outside, a man and woman were in the middle of enjoying themselves. *Oh my, oh gosh, oh goodness... So that’s how you do that...*

Tripping over my own feet, I headed to the next door. I opened this one rather more timidly, and looked first at the bed. Relieved that no one was lying on it, I pushed the door open all the way and looked around properly.

There was a man tied to a chair.

“Lord Francis!” I cried, running into the room.

“What?” He wearily lifted his head. It was clear he was surprised to see me. “Miss Marielle? Why are you...?”

His cheeks were bruised and swollen—he had evidently been struck in the face—but he otherwise looked uninjured. I stood behind his chair and attempted to untie the rope.

“Ugh, it’s tied really tightly.” Even trying to get purchase on the thick rope was making my fingers hurt.

“Miss Marielle, what are you doing here? No, there’s no time for that. You need to get away right now! It won’t be safe here when they come back!” He spoke in a chiding tone, ignoring the danger he himself was in.

I replied without looking up from the rope. “I came *because* it’s not safe! They’re going to kill you, Lord Francis. You also need to get away from here right now!”

“I know that. They’ve been forced into it. I’m a witness, so they can’t let me live.”

“But if you know that, then—”

“I’m only reaping what I’ve sown. My death is inevitable now. I don’t care anymore, so...please, get out of here.” He sounded as though he really didn’t want to be rescued.

“Because you betrayed Lord Simeon?” I replied. He said nothing, so I

continued. “If you believe you’re reaping what you’ve sown, then it means you know that what you did was wrong. You’re aware of having done something terrible.”

“I am,” he said at last. “And that’s why I...”

“Then you have to do your best to escape! If you simply run away like this, without explaining yourself or apologizing, I’ll never forgive you. You need to prostrate yourself before Lord Simeon, tell him everything, and let him know how sorry you are!”

I threw the banknotes on the ground—they were only getting in my way—and redoubled my efforts to untie him. My face distorted with the pain. It felt as though my nails were peeling off.

“If you betray Lord Simeon and then die, can you imagine how much suffering it will cause him!? He’s not the sort of person who would want a man to die simply for betraying him. He would grieve, asking himself why it had to come to this, deeply regretting that he hadn’t realized it sooner. He’d be left with wounds that wouldn’t heal for the rest of his life. That’s who Lord Simeon is! So I won’t forgive you if you leave him to bear such a burden. If you want to die, then do it after you escape from here! Pay for your crime properly, spend about a hundred years repenting for it, and *then* die! Argh, this knot is *far too tight!*”

Just as I lost my temper at the stubborn rope, a relaxed voice floated into the room. “If he waits a hundred years, I suspect he’ll die no matter what.”

“Mr. Miel? Did those men finally give up?” I hadn’t noticed, but at some point the corridor outside had gone quiet.

“Yes. They seem to have found what they were looking for, so they’re being good for now. Here, let me.” He pushed me aside and worked at the rope. Despite it having been tied in such an irritating manner, he untied the knot in moments.

“I find it hard to believe that was so easy for you,” I said.

“Your fingers are much more slender than mine,” he replied. He removed the ropes, then grabbed Lord Francis and pulled him to his feet. “So, you’re Francis, are you? Well now, do you intend to continue being such a worthless coward

after this young lady has shown so much bravery? It might feel good to give in to your despair, but it's entirely self-centered and will do nothing but cause more problems. Your death would be of no use to anyone—it would only make things worse. If you have even a shred of desire to atone for your crimes, then you need to move your feet right now." He kept a kind smile on his face, but his words were tremendously harsh.

Lord Francis's expression conveyed very mixed feelings, as though he was weighing up whether to be angry or shocked. "And you are...?"

"You can call me Mr. Miel. Your legs appear to be fine, yes? Come with me."

Mr. Miel let go of Lord Francis and turned to leave. I gathered up the banknotes on the floor and stood beside Lord Francis, softly pushing him from behind. "Let's go, shall we?"

"Yes," he said at last, nodding. We followed Mr. Miel and walked out into the corridor.

"Argh!" came the cries of pain from the men littering the floor. "Dammit!"

The woman stepped forward and flared up at Mr. Miel. "What is going on? You were going to hire my services, weren't you!?"

He beckoned me over and took the banknotes out of my hands. "My apologies," he told her, "but I no longer have the time. Please accept this as an apology."

He pulled out several notes and handed them to her. After she checked the amount, her anger receded, but she still seemed to have some lingering attachment to Mr. Miel, and held on to his arm.

Ignoring this, he said, "I'd like to leave the building without using the front entrance. Is there any way to get to a back door from up here?"

"There's no need to be in such a hurry. Besides, that man looks injured. Why don't we go to my room so he can rest a while?"

"Another time, perhaps. Hmm, there doesn't appear to be another staircase. Maybe we've no choice but to leave through a window."

"A window?" I asked. I recalled how high it had looked from the outside.

“Won’t that be dangerous? We’ll hurt ourselves!”

“The second floor’s not so high up,” he replied. “It’s all right, I’ll make sure you’re safe. As for you...” He looked at Lord Francis. “You’ll need to fend for yourself. You’re capable, I’m sure.”

Lord Francis and I looked at one another, huffing in disbelief.

Then, in a cutting voice, the woman said, “You, with the glasses. Are you a woman!?”

Someone finally noticed!

Unconcerned by this, Mr. Miel began to usher me back into the room we’d just left. The woman rushed ahead of us and stood in our way. “Stop! What on earth are you planning!?”

“Whether my valet is a man or a woman is no concern of yours. You’re in my way. Step aside.”

“Don’t talk to me like that!”

“Hey, you,” came a gruff voice behind us. “Where do you think you’re going?”

The men had begun to recover, and had come to pick a fight again. I admired their determination, but they were proving to be quite bothersome.

Behind them, though, was a worse problem. Another group of men stood at the top of the staircase.

“Mr. Miel,” I stammered, pulling at his coat—and he noticed as well.

Commander Kastner and his cronies had arrived.

“Well, well, well,” said the commander. “It seemed far too quiet up here, so I thought I’d take a look. Who should I find but some pesky rodent or other. Are you in the royal guards?”

“Me?” Mr. Miel scoffed casually. “Not to blow my own horn, but my looks do tend to stand out from the crowd. If a man like me were in the royal guards, I’d be famous, I’m sure.”

He certainly would! But it was hardly the time for such tomfoolery. The commander, unsurprisingly, did not care about that. With no effort to hide their

bloodlust, he and his men drew nearer, sabers in their hands. *It seems they still brought weapons with them even though they're in civilian clothes!*

Mr. Miel pushed me back out of harm's way, but in the same moment he grabbed the roll of banknotes in my hands and tossed it into the air. Money flew everywhere. A very different expression appeared on the faces of the brawling card players and the woman. She shrieked, while the men shouted, "Out of my way!" "Don't take that! That's mine!" "You! Make way!" Each of them scrambled to grab as much of the money as they could.

With this obstruction, the commander and his men were forced to a standstill. In that brief interval, we made a break for it. We quickly wended our way through the clamoring crowd and made for the staircase. The commander's men slashed at Mr. Miel, who ran at the front of our party, but he blocked them with his cane.

"Move aside, you idiots!" shouted the commander, shoving aside everyone in his path. We ran down the stairs to a chorus of yelps and angry roars behind us and rushed toward the entrance, pushing past the people downstairs who were watching and wondering what was going on.

I tried to stay as close behind Mr. Miel as I could, but it was a struggle in my oversized shoes. I couldn't keep up the pace and rapidly fell further and further behind. Eventually the shoes slipped off my feet entirely. I lost my balance and tumbled to the floor.

"Aaagh!" My knees and arms hit the ground hard and I writhed in pain. When I looked up, Mr. Miel had stopped and begun to turn back.

But our pursuers were faster.

"Why, you...!"

A saber swung in my direction. Lord Francis, who was closer, leapt towards me and took me in his arms to shield me from the deadly strike.

"Both of you can die, then!" bellowed the commander.

"Noooo!" I squeezed my eyes shut and clenched my whole body.

An intense metallic *clang* reverberated. The blade did not hit us.

When I opened my eyes, two competing blades now fought directly above us. The man who had repelled the attack gradually pushed his opponent back before delivering a powerful strike that made his foe lose his balance. Then he kicked him with his military boots, sending him flying.

“Lord Nigel,” he demanded, in a deep voice brimming with anger. “How could you have let this happen?” He stood facing the commander with his back to us.

Mr. Miel drew a blade from inside his cane, then came nearer and stood beside him.

“Yes, indeed. I should have held her hand during the escape.”

“That is not what I mean! How did such a situation occur in the first place? I asked for your help in observing her! Guarding her!”

“I believe I guarded her quite successfully on the whole. Only at the very end did I slip up. As for your question... I suppose it’s simply because I found her so interesting?”

The newcomer turned his head to face Mr. Miel. He looked as though tears were about to stream from his eyes. “What are you—”

Yes, he came! He came for me!

But the commander interrupted, his voice overflowing with astonishment and rage, his mustache quivering. “You bastard! What are you doing here!? Dammit, so you’re not in custody after all! It really was all an act!”

“Commander Kastner,” replied Lord Simeon coolly, “I am arresting you under suspicion of murder and giving falsified reports, and for being caught in the act of attempted murder. Surrender your weapons and come quietly.” Even with the man who had attempted to frame him there before his eyes, he displayed no violent emotion.

The commander, on the other hand, was trembling all over. His face was bright red with anger. “Me? Under arrest!? And where’s your evidence? They’re the criminals here!” He pointed at us. “They were about to escape, so I was forced to try and kill them! What’s wrong with that!?”

His attempt to weasel his way out of it so late in the game left me stunned.

Us, criminals? What a load of nonsense. And why would running away be any sort of justification for killing us!?

I spoke up at this juncture. "If it's evidence you need, I have plenty! I heard every word of your conversation earlier! I'll testify about every detail of your conspiracy in court if I have to!"

"Shut up, boy!"

"Excuse me!" I protested. "That should be 'Shut up, girl!'"

Mr. Miel quietly joked, "I'd say that 'Be quiet, young lady' might be more suitable..."

I continued, "I also saw your comrades kidnap Lord Francis with my very own eyes. I followed them here from the city center! And Lord Francis will testify about your crimes as well! Won't he?"

I turned to look at Lord Francis, but he looked away. His eyes met Lord Simeon's for a brief moment, and he jumped with a start. He hung his head.

"Lord Francis?" I asked.

At last he said, "I'll testify in the interrogation room and in court. I'll confess everything I know."

"You bastard!" roared the commander, outraged. "Do you mean to abandon your family?"

"It's too late. Whatever I do, it's all over!" His voice became a yell. "For you and for me, it's over!"

Though nothing the commander could do would help him now, he lost all power of judgment and flew into a frenzy. Instead of surrendering his weapon, he readied it again and glowered at Lord Simeon with bloodshot eyes. "I'll bury you all! Every last one of you!" Then he and his men attacked.

"Marielle, step back," said Lord Simeon. Lord Francis and I moved away from the battle, taking refuge by the wall near the entrance. The other patrons who weren't involved fled in a panic. Lord Simeon and Mr. Miel were left alone in the center of the room, surrounded by cards and coins scattered everywhere. As they fended off the attacks, they carried on a peaceful conversation.

“And I was hoping to resolve this with minimal bloodshed,” said Mr. Miel.

“Don’t kill them, please,” said Lord Simeon. “I need them alive for questioning.”

The numbers were two versus six, which meant each of them would have to handle three men, but it was hardly a match at all. By this point, I suppose it’s hardly worth mentioning how strong and skilled Lord Simeon is. He dodged the sword strikes that came for him, then took down the foe who delivered them the very next moment. He targeted only their arms and legs, aiming to leave them helpless but alive. As for Mr. Miel, he was somewhat more vulgar, aiming exclusively for their faces. When I saw the blood gushing from their heads, I couldn’t help averting my eyes. *Eurgh, it’s terrifying to witness... But the wounds aren’t actually that deep, are they? The head tends to bleed very visibly, but it should be less serious than it looks.* The wounds Lord Simeon was delivering were deeper, I was sure. Mr. Miel was inflicting psychological wounds instead—robbing the enemy of their will to fight.

But the two men had in common that their particular fighting styles were only possible because of their incomparable swordsmanship.

Before I knew it, the commotion had abated. Now that I could look around more calmly, I saw that a number of other knights had arrived, led by Alain. However, they had not stepped in, instead standing and watching the fight. Only when Lord Simeon gave the order did they move in to take Commander Kastner and his cohorts into custody.

Lord Simeon wiped his bloodstained sword, then returned it to his scabbard and walked over to me.

He stared directly at me with eyes so sharp they pierced right through me.



Chapter Eleven

I looked at Lord Simeon as he stood silently before me. I had expected all along that he would rebuke me, and I had prepared my piece to say in response. Even so, it was terrifying to be glared at like this.

Lord Simeon did not say a word. Instead, he raised his right hand overhead. Knowing I was about to be struck, I pulled my head in, closed my eyes, and braced myself. But too many moments passed with no shock of pain. I opened my eyes gingerly. Lord Simeon was facing away, his hand balled into a tight fist.

The strength finally drained from his trembling hand, and the tension left his shoulders and back as well. He quietly sighed, then abruptly turned on his heel. He walked off without saying a word to me. The sight of his back was somehow a harsher blow than being struck.

Not even a lecture. Has he given up on me entirely?

Had he finally exhausted all his affection for me because I never listened to a word he said?

Lord Simeon did not turn around. The back he had so resolutely turned on me grew steadily further away. I had endless things to tell him, to ask him, but he refused me any chance and entered a realm I couldn't reach. My tears began to flow and I could do nothing to stop them. It wasn't mere sadness or loneliness. My heart simply ached too much to contain it any longer.

I sobbed, and my tears spilled onto the floor. I cast my eyes downward and grasped the hem of my jacket.

"Dear oh dear," said Mr. Miel, letting out a deep sigh. "What a cruel fiancé you are, leaving her alone to cry like this. You could listen to her reasons, at least. This is not a situation where she deserves to take all the blame. Though I'm sure the average young lady would have remained a mere spectator as you had wished."

Lord Simeon still did not turn around.

“You’re capable, yet closed-minded, is that it? I’m highly disappointed. Very well, then. I’ll take her off your hands.” Mr. Miel came over to me and pulled me into his arms. I was awash with the scent of musk and *bois de rose*.

“Mr. Miel,” I stammered.

“Your tomboyish qualities don’t bother me one whit. You’re a hundred times more interesting than a young lady who’s no more than a pretty doll. You would never bore me. Your intense dedication and bravery are more appealing than words can describe. To me, you are a precious gem. You should reject any man foolish enough to discard you so negligently. You’ll be far happier for it.”

His sensuous voice, as sweet as honey, flowed into my ears. The mellow sound of his words, and the warmth of his chest pressing against me, were enough to set my heart racing even at a moment like this. His liquid allure entangled me, robbing my whole body of the power to object.

But...he doesn't satisfy me.

No matter how appealing a man he was, and how kindly he treated me, it didn’t fill the vast hole that had opened in my heart. Only one person could banish this great sense of loss. I wouldn’t be satisfied by anyone but Lord Simeon.

I shook my head as if to deny Mr. Miel. Even if I had been abandoned by Lord Simeon, I couldn’t take someone else’s hand. Even if I couldn’t be happy, I still couldn’t look elsewhere. There was no one for me but Lord Simeon.

As I made to escape from my gentle confinement, a faint, ragged voice reached my ears. “I know.”

Mr. Miel noticed it as well, and we both turned our heads at once. Lord Simeon’s fist was trembling again.

“I don’t need you to tell me. I already know. I know how much Marielle cares about me, the lengths she went to for my sake. I didn’t even need to see it, and I knew. No one in this world knows more about Marielle’s kindness than I do!”

“Oho,” replied Mr. Miel. “Then why not acknowledge it? Would it be so difficult to praise her for her efforts?”

“My feelings cannot be resolved as straightforwardly as that!” he cried, turning around swiftly. His light blue eyes, which I’d expected to be cold with displeasure, burned with a passionate fire. “What could *you* understand? Kindly refrain from meddling in matters that don’t concern you purely for your own amusement!”

“Strong words, but if you’re making her cry like this, I fear they are meaningless. Besides, what’s wrong with a little amusement? I happen to have a taste for young ladies who make life interesting. If you’re unable to make her happy, then I’ll have no reservation in stealing her from you.” Mr. Miel laughed and embraced me even more tightly, despite my objections.

This was more than enough provocation for Lord Simeon. He lost his composure entirely. Brimming with anger, he said, “Unhand her, Lord Nigel. She is *my* fiancée. I won’t forgive such insolent behavior. If you go any further, I will insist upon a duel!”

His hand rested on the hilt of his saber. Unrattled, Mr. Miel finally released me, brushing me aside so suddenly I had no chance to stop him, and replied with a swing of his own blade. “A duel, then. Show me that you’re not all bark and no bite.”

Lord Simeon silently drew his saber, and the two of them took a fighting stance, both filled with naked bloodlust.

Why is this happening? We were in the middle of an arrest! There were people all around!

Lord Francis, the knights, and the other curious onlookers were dumbfounded, unable to comprehend that a duel was about to erupt so suddenly. I would rather they had tried to stop them than simply gazed on in shock, but I could understand their feelings. This collision of murderous intentions was too terrifying to draw any closer to. Even calling out to them, asking them to stop, felt impossible. It wasn’t the sort of atmosphere where one could shout something along the lines of, *Surely you know that dueling is forbidden by law!*

Was this all because of me? Was this my fault!?

I lost all presence of mind as the two of them stood before me, ready to come

to blows. If these two master swordsmen were to fight, it would likely have an outcome that could not be undone. *I have to stop this, even if it means throwing my life away!*

I steeled all of my resolve, ready to leap.

An instant before I did, a voice in the doorway said, “Hold it right there.”

The sound of high-heeled shoes clacked against the wooden floor. The crowd split in two, and a figure appeared in the path that opened. A tall beauty in men’s clothing.

Her sunrise-colored eyes looked at the two men. In an exasperated tone, she said, “Lord Nigel, this joke has gone too far. And you, Simeon, calm down. You shouldn’t be making such a horrifying face in front of your adorable lover.”

Lady Rose chided the two men with a grown-up sense of ease. Mr. Miel shrugged his shoulders in a carefree manner, while Lord Simeon finally returned to his senses and withdrew his saber.

“Lady Rose,” I said, on hands and knees before my rescuer. *A goddess has come to save me! Lady Rose, you are simply incredible!*

Lady Rose let out a small chuckle and looked at me with kind eyes.

Mr. Miel slid his blade back inside the cane. “I suppose I’ve no choice but to stop if I’m told to by such a beautiful woman. We shall have to put our duel on hold.”

With an embarrassed expression, Lord Simeon returned his sword to its scabbard as well. He appeared to have realized that Mr. Miel had been stringing him along. He glanced at me briefly, his face rather red.

Mr. Miel looked at me and winked. *Oh dear, my face is burning as well!* But I couldn’t keep my lips from breaking out into a smile. I’d been shown definitively that Lord Simeon hadn’t given up on me. *Right now I don’t exactly feel able to thank you directly, but...even so, thank you, Mr. Miel!*

Perhaps in an effort to hide his blushing, Lord Simeon suddenly turned away. Paying us no more mind, he walked over to his subordinates. He ordered the knights to take the criminals away, and—out of respect for their beloved Vice

Captain—they maintained relatively neutral faces and kindly held back from making any teasing comments.

As they began to lead Lord Francis away, he stared at Lord Simeon with a complicated expression. Lord Simeon noticed this, and the two faced one another in silence. Lord Francis's mouth opened, as though he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words. At last he turned away without saying anything. He simply lowered his head and let himself be taken away. Lord Simeon showed neither anger nor sadness, but quietly watched him go.

Everyone involved was escorted to the palace, and I borrowed a room in the crown prince's quarters to change back into my own clothes. A lady-in-waiting helped me dress myself and kindly applied my makeup as well. On the other side of a partition, Arthur got changed as well.

"I'm sorry for making you wear a dress," I said to him as the lady-in-waiting arranged my hair.

After confirming that I was fully dressed, Arthur came out from behind the screen. "Oh, no, you needn't worry at all. It was on my master's orders."

He wore a calm and restrained face that seemed beyond his years. I'd have expected any man (unless he had particular predilections) to object to wearing women's clothing, and on top of that, he was an adolescent. If the general public had seen him in a dress it could have been very embarrassing for him indeed, but he hadn't breathed a word of complaint. I silently expressed my admiration for his dedication and professionalism. As much for my benefit as for his, I didn't tell him that the dress had suited him better than me.

Instead, I asked him about something that had been preying on my mind. "Your master's real name is Lord Nigel, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Could it be that he's...Nigel Shannon?"

When I brought up the name that had occurred to me as soon as I'd heard him called "Nigel," something resembling an emotion appeared in Arthur's dark eyes for the first time. He looked at me with the barest hint of approval on his face.

He nodded. “That’s correct.”

“I knew it,” I replied. I let out a deep breath.

“I’m impressed by your powers of deduction,” he said.

The lady-in-waiting cocked her head in confusion as she tied my hair with a ribbon. Once she was finished, she showed me the end result in the mirror, even holding up a hand mirror so that I could see the back. “Nigel Shannon?” she said. “He must be Easdalian, yes? Who is he exactly?”

“You’ve heard of Duke Shannon?” I asked.

“Yes,” she replied. “He’s a major nobleman in Easdale, I believe.”

“Precisely. House Shannon is closely related by blood to the Easdalian royal family, and if you trace their bloodline, they’re also related to the royal family of Shulk.”

“Goodness, they have southern blood as well?”

“Yes. Generations ago, a princess from Easdale married into the Shulkian royal family, but after much trial and tribulation, their child returned to Easdale.”

This child had inherited House Shannon, and so the bloodline had continued until the present day.

“They’re also related to House Avory, who control the Oakwood region,” I said.

“The Burly Earldom!?”

“Burly...” It surprised me to hear a palace lady-in-waiting use such a nickname. Still, it was certainly true that our neighbors’ most battle-hardy family was well known in our country as well. They were the house that guarded Easdale’s border with Lagrange, and had been our opponents on the battlefield in the past—which had taught us a firm lesson to avoid crossing swords with them in the future. They were strong and dauntless, and as a family, they were obsessed with musculature to a degree that suggested some level of madness. In tales of warfare written in both kingdoms, House Avory was treated as a force of nature, and not to be tangled with if one could possibly avoid it.

“Yes, that’s right,” I said, regaining my poise. “There was also a case where a member of House Ivory married into House Shannon, which led to the formation of an order of knights charged with protecting the duke. To this day, there are people who inherit the title and responsibility of that order. One of those is Nigel Shannon, the duke’s nephew. He works in the open and in the shadows, and is renowned as one of the most skilled fighters of the present age.”

He was Duke Shannon’s right-hand man, active on many different fronts at the same time. I had heard about him, but I’d always expected him to have inherited the Ivory blood so strongly that he’d have a frighteningly muscular appearance. Instead, he had turned out to be a refined and rather alluring gentleman.

“You’re very familiar with the details,” said Arthur in a rare interruption from his side. He must not have expected someone from Lagrange to know so much about a famous figure from his own country.

“Rumors of him spread here from time to time as well,” I answered neatly. It wasn’t a lie, exactly. Only, the reason I knew so many details was that I’d dedicated myself to gathering all the information that passed through society. “Whenever I heard about his deeds, I always thought he sounded so awe-inspiring. I’ve wondered what kind of person he might be, and wished to see him one day if I could. I never expected he would come to me.”

It really was a surprise. Why had someone as important as that been following me around? *Either way, it seems to have been at Lord Simeon’s request somehow...*

With my appearance finally in order, I thanked the lady-in-waiting and stood. She led me and Arthur to the room where Lord Simeon and the others were waiting.

His Highness once again stood in a very imposing stance.

“*Ma...ri...elle!*” he bellowed.

Goodness, he’s finally dropped the “Miss.”

He grabbed onto my head tightly.

“Stop it!” I shouted. “You’ll ruin my freshly styled hair! If you keep bullying me, I won’t introduce you to Julianne!”

His Highness groaned. “You’re playing dirty!”

“You definitely want to be in my good graces right now! Her Majesty has redoubled her efforts to find you a wife, and it seems she’ll even accept a baron’s daughter at this point. As long as Julianne is interested, your future is looking rosy!”

“Is that true!? But...how can I woo her? I’m not a rich old man.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that. You can offer her something that will appeal to her even more. If you simply stand *very* close to Lord Nigel over there, and look *very* friendly with him, her eyes will light up and she’ll jump right into your arms!”

“But won’t she simply be using me to fuel her all-male erotic fantasies!?”

He thankfully let go of my head without ruffling my hair too badly, but then he pinched my cheeks instead. “Ow!” I yelped. “That hurts!”

“And what about my pain? The pain in my poor heart!? I really will start crying!”

Watching our back and forth, Mr. Miel said in an admiring tone, “They certainly get along well. Are you certain you don’t need to be jealous of him?”

“Quite certain,” Lord Simeon replied in a knowing voice. “Their playfulness is more akin to a sibling relationship.”

I sat down in the chair I was directed to, rubbing my sore face. Arthur went straight to Mr. Miel’s side, bowed to his master, then positioned himself behind him.

His Highness put an elbow on his armrest and rested his chin in his hand. With a sigh, he said, “I heard the general details from Lord Nigel, but I still cannot believe you would even *think* of setting foot in a gambling den in the shabbiest part of the city.”

“It was a matter of life and death,” I replied. “I could hardly be concerned about what sort of place it was!”

“And this gambling den served as a brothel as well, I’m told?”

“Yes. At one point I accidentally peeked into a room that was currently in use.”

“Forget what you saw, right now! Erase it from your memory!” He slapped me on the forehead. *As though that’s going to make the memory fly out of my head!*

“It’s not as though I *wanted* to look. I was searching for Lord Francis. Speaking of which, where is he now?”

The only ones present were Lord Simeon, His Highness, and Mr. Miel, along with Arthur and a few knights standing guard. There was no sign of Lord Francis or Lady Rose.

I looked at Lord Simeon, and he responded to my question. “He’s one of the suspects. He’s been placed in a holding cell.”

“I see,” I replied. *I suppose that’s to be expected. Lord Francis is not a mere victim in this case.*

Lord Simeon’s face was as cool and composed as always; I could make out no sign of how he felt toward Lord Francis. I couldn’t imagine that he felt nothing, however. No one could be betrayed by their childhood friend and not feel sad to some extent. However, he hid his personal feelings entirely and spoke in a businesslike manner. “We knew from Rose that Francis had been in contact with Commander Kastner’s gang. We’ve been observing him from the start.”

“From the start? Even when you met at the port?”

“No, I only received the report from Rose after that. This was almost immediately after I’d noticed the false bottom in the document box, so I knew right away that Francis was the likely culprit. I asked Adrien to tell me about the day he bought the box, and it became clear that Francis was the one who had suggested that box in particular.”

Was that why she was there that day? To give her report? Lady Rose had visited Lord Simeon at his home in order to report to him secretly, away from any prying eyes. And on her way out, her carriage had gone past mine.

In which case, when we had met Lord Francis at the wedding reception, Lord Simeon had already known about Lord Francis's betrayal. Lord Simeon had smiled, acting as though nothing was wrong, while knowing that the man right in front of him was part of a conspiracy to frame him.

What feelings had lay behind that smile, I wondered? I had discerned nothing unusual at all. The closest he came to revealing anything had been his comment on the ride home that he thought Lord Francis might have hated him.

"If you were observing him," I replied, "that means you also knew he had been kidnapped, and where he had been taken to, doesn't it? Which means...everything I did this afternoon has been a waste of time." My shoulders sagged dejectedly. Lord Simeon had known everything, and already had matters under control. There had been no need for me to worry, or to go to such lengths.

His Highness, perhaps noticing how dispirited I was, said, "We had indeed been observing Francis Louvier, but without your intervention, we can't be sure he would have made it out alive. Those observing him were only tasked with reporting his movements back to us. Without specific orders, they wouldn't have set foot inside the building. Besides, Lord Nigel knew all of the particulars. For reasons I cannot fathom, he kept a perfect poker face and stayed silent about details he most certainly should have shared with you at the time. If you're to hold a grudge against anyone, it should be him."

Even under the weight of the prince's glare, Mr. Miel maintained an easygoing smile. He looked at me and said, "I didn't think it was a waste of time in the slightest, or I wouldn't have helped you. Your own judgment is an entirely separate matter from Vice Captain Flaubert's planning and strategizing. I was highly interested in seeing what you would do in the situation you had encountered, and what results it would lead to. In circumstances where an ordinary young noblewoman would do nothing but panic, you did absolutely everything you could. Is that a waste of time? I think not."

This was no mere attempt to soothe me. It was clear on his face that he truly felt this way.

"You thought as hard as you could about how to play the cards you had been

dealt—and how to win. You considered what you could do, and what you *should* do. When a person dedicates themselves to a cause like that, I see that as the furthest thing from a waste of time. And, because you were fighting so desperately for Francis’s life, that feeling even got through to him, didn’t it? So I’d say there’s no reason for you to feel downhearted at all.”

Mr. Miel turned to Lord Simeon.

“If she had been in real danger I’d have stopped her, of course—but my very presence lessened the danger. I knew that you and your men would be arriving before too long, so I committed to escaping rather than fighting, but if the need had arisen, I’d have been able to take them all down by myself.”

“I seem to recall that Marielle narrowly avoided being slain by the enemy,” said Lord Simeon.

“And it hurts a little to hear you tease me about it,” he said, with a hint of a bitter smile. But in a cheerful tone, he continued, “Admittedly, I should have taken her by the hand to ensure she didn’t fall behind. That was a mistake on my part. Still, if you hadn’t arrived in time, I would have prevented it. There were chairs all around, so I could have thrown one of those, for example.”

Despite a look of astonishment at Mr. Miel’s audacity, Lord Simeon also did not object to this. *I suppose even he acknowledges that Mr. Miel would have been strong enough to do such a thing.*

Had my actions really not been a waste of time? Was it all right for me to think that?

I stole a glance at Lord Simeon. The reason for his anger was that he was worried about me, of course. I was certain of that much. However, instead of lecturing me as usual, he had stayed silent, and a far more terrible emotion had appeared in his eyes. What had he thought of me in that moment, when he had held back the hand that he had raised, then turned his back without saying anything?

I regained control of my feelings and proceeded with my questions. “Was Lord Francis being threatened by Commander Kastner in some way? The commander mentioned something about him abandoning his family. Lord Francis’s family... That would refer to his mother and sister, would it not? Were

they being held hostage or some such?”

“He was indeed being threatened,” Lord Simeon replied. “Francis had repeatedly engaged in irregular business practices that made trade deals more favorable to Gandia. Commander Kastner and his cohorts caught wind of that and used it to strongarm Francis into helping them. As part of their search for material that could be used against me, they systematically investigated everyone associated with me. Since Adrien was working in Gandia as well, they no doubt learned about Francis and his activities while observing Adrien and those around him.”

“Irregular business practices?” I said, almost to myself. His mother was Gandian, and his sister was soon to be married to a Gandian man. Had it been for their sake that he had arranged things more conveniently for the Gandian side?

Mr. Miel interjected, “That red-mustached sailor must have quite a grudge against you if he went to such great lengths to frame you.”

It was true, this was not at the level of merely tormenting someone you didn’t like. Those doing the grunt work may have been comfortable lending a hand because of their antipathy toward the Royal Order of Knights in general, but the main culprit, Commander Kastner, must have had a stronger motive.

“Perhaps,” said Lord Simeon with a composed expression. “I can’t say I’ve particularly done anything to antagonize him.”

His Highness turned to him with a look of slight exasperation. “Simeon exposed a smuggling ring that the navy had failed to deal with. The underlying story was more tangled, of course. It involved other countries and their opinions of us and so forth. In any case, it was thanks to Simeon here that the situation came to light, and we were able to nip it in the bud before it turned out too unfavorably for Lagrange.”

“I can hardly take credit for that. It was loosely connected with my house’s own ventures, so I noticed it by coincidence. That was all.”

“I can appreciate that,” His Highness replied, “but even so, the navy should have cracked down on it far earlier, and instead they were taking money under the table. Your actions left them with their proverbial pants down. It gave

Commander Kastner two reasons to hate you. On an official level you stole an achievement that should have been his, and on a less official level, you removed a rather lucrative source of income for him. Three, perhaps, since his career prospects dwindled rather a lot owing to the suspicion of accepting bribes.”

“And you didn’t proceed with arresting the commander at that point?” I asked.

“Sadly not. His behavior was very suspicious indeed, but we weren’t able to pin him down due to a lack of conclusive evidence. However, there was no need for an official sentence. The rumors spread on their own, and many doors were closed to him. I’ve no doubt he blamed all of that on Simeon and holds quite a grudge against him.”

He should be blaming himself! Not that I’d ever thought the commander was a good person, but it was becoming apparent just how much of a scoundrel he was.

“So then, what was Lady Rose’s role?” I asked. “I can accept that she became involved in the first place because Lord Francis was her colleague and she knew he was being extorted, but why was she put in such danger as to go undercover?”

I knew there had to be more to it than the simple fact that Lord Simeon trusted her. Thinking back, it seemed as though His Highness had also trusted her implicitly right from the start, and there had to be an explanation for that. I felt somewhat disappointed in myself—if only my feelings of jealousy hadn’t left me so rattled, I’d have realized it sooner.

His Highness and Lord Simeon exchanged glances, and Mr. Miel spoke up with mirth in his voice. “If you’re worried about what I might hear, that’s quite unnecessary. I’ve done enough investigating of my own to know. She’s a spy, isn’t she?”

His Highness grimaced at hearing this spoken so frankly.

Lady Rose is a spy! So...there is such a thing as a female intelligence operative!

Though, in all honesty, it had already seemed inconceivable to me that there

wouldn't be. Even in the history books, there were plenty of stories of brave women who used their beauty and allure as a weapon, working in the shadows and putting men to shame with their skills. Ultimately, men could not resist feminine wiles. Even the toughest hero couldn't hope to win against a woman's seductive powers. In my wild imagination I had wondered if a mysterious *femme fatale* like that might exist in the present day, but I hadn't expected it to be Lady Rose! *Goodness gracious, I'm fangirling over her so hard!*

I wondered what series of events had led this former baron's daughter to end up in such a position. It stirred up my creative urges immensely.

"Your Highness," I began.

"Don't ask anything further," he replied. "Didn't I tell you there are certain things an outsider cannot ask and expect to be answered?"

"No, it's not that." I leaned forward and slammed my hands onto the table. "If female intelligence operatives exist, then...please, hire me as one! I'll be the most valuable undercover investigator you have!"

His Highness slammed his hands onto the table as well. "Application denied!"

"But why!? Admittedly I don't have much in the way of feminine wiles, but with my extremely low-key presence I can hide in plain sight and act without anyone knowing I'm there! It's my ultimate skill! I'll even work hard to truly master the art of disguise!"

"You've no need to master that! And I've no need for a spy whose driving force is fangirling! Aren't you satisfied with being both a future earl's wife and a pseudonymous author!? You're already non-standard enough without aiming for more! Are you intent on making Simeon worry himself to death!?"

When he made that last observation, I gingerly looked at Lord Simeon, who looked back at me with both reproach and understanding evident on his face. Dejected, I returned to my seat.

Mr. Miel alone laughed cheerfully. "What a waste of her skills! Perhaps I should hire her instead."

"Lord Nigel," His Highness began, but Mr. Miel quickly interrupted.

“I must say, I did not expect to have this much fun so soon after arriving in Lagrange. I was slightly disgruntled at being assigned to such a stuffy position, but I quite underestimated how interesting it would be. Just meeting her made it worth coming to this country.”

As he looked at me, his sweet gaze and tone startled me. I thought he’d found me to be an amusing trifle at best, but hearing these words expressed so sincerely by such a thoroughly sensual person left me struggling with my own responses. I should have been used to it by now, but he made me tremble every time. This man was just a natural ladykiller.

The threatening flame in Lord Simeon’s eyes was rather terrifying. But Mr. Miel answered his gaze with an easygoing smile, then looked back to me and said, “I had heard what a memorable team you and Vice Captain Flaubert make. Earl Cialdini told me a little about it. I thought that might be some small consolation for a rather dull term of office, but what I’ve seen is beyond what I could have ever imagined. I certainly hope you’ll show me plenty more of your remarkable nature in the future.”

Though I had an urge to object that I did not exist purely for Mr. Miel’s entertainment, what stood out more was the name he’d mentioned. “Earl Cialdini? You mean...”

“I believe you’re familiar with him?”

“You might say that.” I exchanged glances with Lord Simeon and His Highness, and each of us let out a sigh. To think that Lutin, the thief who had caused so much trouble—also known as Earl Cialdini, the spy from the Grand Duchy of Lavia—was associated with Mr. Miel.

“It can’t be that shocking, surely,” said Mr. Miel. “Just as he made contact with you, he’s also not unfamiliar to us. Lavia is between Easdale and Lagrange, and has survived as a country by carefully maintaining the balance. Oh, that reminds me, he asked if I could pass on some messages. To Miss Marielle, he says, ‘I love you.’ To Vice Captain Flaubert, he says, ‘I’m coming for you when you least expect it.’”

An ominous *crack* resounded. Where a teacup had been in Lord Simeon’s hand, all that remained was the handle. He had squeezed it so hard that broken

shards lay on the table and tea was streaming onto the floor. “That common criminal,” he uttered in a frightfully deep voice.

Studiously ignoring him, I said, “My final question, then. I’d like to know about your involvement in the case, Mr. Miel. Excuse me, I mean Lord Nigel. How did you come to be involved?”

“Mr. Miel is fine with me,” he replied. “I rather like that nickname.”

“Still, we’d best avoid it.” *Please, it’s better not to provoke Lord Simeon any further.*

Easdale’s relationship with Lagrange was an uneasy one. It was quite mysterious that a member of such a prominent Easdalian noble family was cooperating with us. Hadn’t the problem at the very heart of this case been that official secrets had been leaked to Easdale? It would have been more natural for Mr. Miel to be working against us.

“I was dispatched to Lagrange in order to serve as our next ambassador. The current ambassador’s term is drawing to a close, so I arrived slightly earlier to allow for a proper handover.”

“I see!” So, this man was to be an ambassador—an Easdalian knight with blood ties to the Burly Earldom. It certainly did seem like an unlikely assignment for him. I could see why he had been less than enthusiastic about it. I expected the young ladies of society to be very excited about his arrival, however. It would be quite a to-do for a man as attractive as him to be attending social gatherings.

“My uncle gave me another order as well. While I was here, I was to take care of a thorny problem that was developing between Easdale and Lagrange. As convenient as it was to have this secret information being fed to us, none of it was especially useful. Furthermore, it seemed they had intentionally done it in rather an exposed and obvious manner, as if they were planning for it to come to light. Easdale was being used as well, being made to look as though we were pulling the strings from the shadows. Despite our many ups and downs, our two nations are still on friendly terms, and send ambassadors to one another. It was quite worrying to be treated in this odd manner, as if a seed of discord was being sown between us. It seemed sure to lead to our relationship growing ever

more strained, perhaps even to war in the end. It would have been best if Lagrange had solved it quickly on their own, but they seemed to be having a hard time.”

Lord Simeon and His Highness kept glancing at Mr. Miel with rather embittered expressions.

“So you offered to help?” I asked.

“I explained Easdale’s perspective on the matter and swore that the upper echelons of my country were not involved. I offered to lend a hand if need be. In exchange, my conditions were that one of our captured intelligence operatives should be quietly returned to us.”

“Lord Nigel,” said His Highness firmly.

Rebuked by His Highness, Mr. Miel stopped. *Honestly, Your Highness, you don’t need to glare at me like that! I’m not going to start spreading this around or writing novels about it. Why do you still not trust me?*

But after a moment, Mr. Miel continued, “My offer was refused, in any case. His Highness was confident that Lagrange could solve the case on its own. However, Vice Captain Flaubert did ask for my help in observing and guarding you. He was worried about what you might do if left to your own devices.”

Really? I glared at Lord Simeon, and he responded with a rather awkward expression, “Was I wrong? I was sure you would obtain relevant information from somewhere and end up right in the middle of it all.”

“Well, I can’t exactly deny that, but...it still strikes me as rather audacious to make that request of such an important man.” To think that he had asked a duke’s nephew and future ambassador to be my personal bodyguard!

“I didn’t expect him to guard you himself. I knew he would have brought some men with him, so I thought he would deploy one or two of those, perhaps. The royal guards aren’t well suited to that sort of duty, and even within the Royal Order of Knights we were trying to restrict the flow of information as much as possible, so it seemed to make sense to ask Lord Nigel, who already knew all the details, to lend us some of his troops.”

“Alas, as I hinted at earlier,” interjected Mr. Miel, “I was bored.”

“Didn’t you have other responsibilities?” asked Lord Simeon. “You mentioned a handover?”

“Oh, that? I delegated it.”

I reflexively glanced over at Arthur, who looked away. No doubt he had been burdened with many strenuous tasks that his master had preferred to delegate. I sympathized with him, sharing his sense of exhaustion.

Then I asked Mr. Miel, “Had this been arranged before we even met in the city that day?”

“No, that encounter really was a coincidence. I still didn’t know your face at that point, but when I realized later who you were, it all fell into place. I knew there couldn’t be too many young ladies brave enough to leap out in front of a raging military officer.”

“Marielle...” seethed Lord Simeon—the foreshadowing of another lecture.

“*Ma...ri...elle!?*” raged His Highness, bullying me with his fists once again.

Oh, fiddlesticks! I thought I’d gotten away with that one! Crying, I shouted, “Mr. Miel!”

Mr. Miel began to laugh jovially. In that moment, I could definitely tell why he got along with Lutin.

It seemed we would be seeing this man for several years to come. With him as Easdale’s ambassador, I felt sure our two countries would remain on good terms.

Chapter Twelve

The arrest at the gambling den did not close the case. There was still plenty of interrogation and other work that had to be carried out, but this was mainly the responsibility of the military police. Lord Simeon was allowed to return home for the time being. Lord Adrien too, of course.

While Lord Adrien had been confined to the palace, they had made him assist with some finicky administrative work, telling him that they didn't want him to suffer the boredom of having nothing to do. To freely paraphrase that, they didn't want him to be a good-for-nothing layabout.

"It was hell, I tell you! I was trapped in a room and surrounded by endless piles of paper! Day after day, nothing but calculations to do and fair copies to produce! I thought I would go mad!"

"Your complaints might be more valid if your work wasn't so appalling," said Lord Simeon, checking the documents Lord Adrien had completed. "Your calculations are full of errors, and the so-called 'fair copies' are barely legible. It will all have to be done again from scratch. I cannot believe my own brother would be so useless. If I'd known this would be the result, I'd have given you cleaning duties instead."

Lord Adrien broke down in tears.

Lord Simeon had said he would take me home, so I was waiting for him to be finished with this business, but it seemed as though it would still take a while. This presented a good opportunity to go and say hello to Princess Henriette at last, so I excused myself and left His Highness's quarters.

Apparently the queen was holding another tea party today. This time the guests were not candidates for His Highness's hand, but her relatives: Duke Chaler, Duke Silvestre and their wives. Her Majesty's intention was, I suspected, to complain to them and ask if they had any good candidates to suggest. His Highness had told me the tea party would soon draw to a close, which meant Princess Henriette, who was also in attendance, might be

available soon. I headed into the depths of the palace.

I asked a lady-in-waiting to request an audience for me, and she told me to wait in a reception room. A faint scent lingered in the room, as though it had been used by someone else shortly beforehand. *Jasmine, with bergamot mixed in as well. Scents that can be used by men or women.*

This reminded me that before Arthur had put on my dress, I had applied some *parfum*—Countess Estelle’s special love potion. It could be rather awkward for a man to have that scent transferred onto him. With a small measure of guilt, I laughed, imagining a troubled expression on that ever-impassive face. I only hoped that Mr. Miel hadn’t made fun of him for it. Chuckling to myself, I reclined into my seat.

Suddenly, a streak of lightning shot through my mind. *Perfume... Jasmine...*

I pictured the rose-colored perfume bottle with a crescent moon engraved on it. *The moon... Like the moonlight wavering on the water’s surface...*

I shot up with a gasp. My heart was beating nearly out of my chest. I had to go back right away. I had to ask someone to give my deepest apologies to Princess Henriette, and go straight back to Lord Simeon!

I turned to face the door, about to rush out—but then froze in alarm. The door that I was sure had been closed was now open, and a man stood in the doorway.

“I see I’m not the only one who wishes to see the princess today,” he said in a languid voice that held no surprise. *He must have opened the door silently, knowing that someone was inside.* “What brings you here all alone?”

I held my breath in fear and delivered a curtsy, straining to look as natural as possible. “Good day, Duke Silvestre. I was thinking of saying hello to Princess Henriette, so I requested an audience.”

“Indeed? She does seem rather fond of you.” The black-haired duke stepped into the room, a faint smile on his lips. He quietly closed the door, cutting off the outside world, then walked over to me with slow, graceful steps. He peered down at me with an emotion I couldn’t place. His gray eyes were always so vague, always looking into the distance as though he was thoroughly bored and

had no particular interest in anything—and now they were focused directly on me. A hint of a smile began to appear in them.

I bowed my head. “My apologies, Your Grace, I wasn’t aware that you had a need to see the princess. The lady-in-waiting who let me in was apparently unaware of this as well. I wouldn’t want to get in your way, so I’ll leave immediately.”

“Oh, I don’t mind.”

The duke ignored my expressed intent to leave, and did not even sit down. Instead he continued to stand right in front of me, giving me no room to maneuver. If he acted this way, I couldn’t simply take my leave of him. His status was far too high for that. Did I have no choice but to converse with him until the lady-in-waiting returned?

A chill ran down my spine. It took all my might to maintain a placid smile as my forehead threatened to break out into a sweat.

Watching me, the duke let out a snort of laughter. “What’s wrong? Aren’t you always observing those around you with such drive and enthusiasm?”

“What? I...”

“Do I not arouse your interest?”

What was he saying? His phrasing suggested he knew all about me, and had for quite a while. Observing the people around me... Was he referring to my time spent collecting information at social events?

I’d often attended gatherings alone before I got engaged to Lord Simeon—and even afterwards, in fact. I had made myself as inconspicuous as possible and blended into the scenery, listening to gossip and observing the human condition as reflected in high society. With my lack of a distinctive presence—Lord Simeon sometimes called it “camouflage”—I toiled away, finding reference material to use for my writing.

Did this man know all that about me? How?

I began to feel short of breath, and tried to calm myself. Learning that he knew this about me was no reason to tremble in fear. In any normal

circumstance, it would be a cause for joy to even be noticed by a duke.

So I mustn't let him perceive any fear or anxiety. I'm just an innocent and clueless young lady. It's an honor for the likes of me to be acknowledged by him. I had to convey that impression. I decided I'd say it outright. I put a smile on my face, and opened my mouth—

But before I could form a single word, the duke reached out and lifted up a wisp of my hair. His smile deepened as my shoulders tensed, and he moved his hand from my hair to my cheek. His hands, so pale and slender, always gave an impression of lacking any warmth, but there was heat there after all. He gently traced a line from my cheek to the nape of my neck. It made me tremble in all the wrong ways.

"Ex... Excuse me..."

"You have pretty hair. The color may be dull, but it feels good to touch."

"Thank you," I stammered.

"Such an innocent reaction, suggesting such inexperience. Has your fiancé not done anything like this with you?"

"Your Grace..."

"Despite watching other couples' trysts with such glee, you dislike it when a man draws near to you? What an odd young lady you are. Or is it that you're scared of me?"

The duke wrapped his other arm around my back. He pulled me into his chest, surrounding me with the scent of jasmine.

"Please," I uttered, "stop toying with me. Don't you have a wife?"

"What if I do?"

"What if you...?" I tried to push him back, but he only embraced me more tightly, his face coming closer to mine. In spite of his close resemblance to Prince Severin and His Majesty, his face made an entirely different impression on me. Even though his features were laid out perfectly, I still had a sense that something was not right. Staring at him made me feel intensely uncomfortable—and yet I couldn't look away.

Olga had told me, “You mustn’t get too close to the moon. If you find yourself being drawn in, you must run away.”

I had been caught by the moon, beautiful yet horrifying. *Someone help me. Come and drive away the moon. Someone! Lord Simeon!*

“S...stop, please!” Somehow I wrung those words from my throat and turned my face away from the duke. Though my arms were hardly able to fight back, I mustered all the strength I could. “Even if you are a duke, I must ask that you do not involve me in your mischievous practical joke any longer!”

“Why not? It’s a common enough sight, no? I’m sure you’ve seen it plenty of times.”

“I’m about to be married. I won’t permit behavior like this from any gentleman other than my fiancé!”

Still smiling, the duke advanced as if to push me down onto the couch. I pushed back with all my might. If a man really used his full strength I’d have been knocked over in an instant, so I knew the duke was still going easy on me. Was that because he didn’t really mean any of this, or because he derived enjoyment from my struggle?

“Why is a man of your status pursuing me in the first place? I don’t understand! Is this some sort of bullying?”

“Bullying? What an off-putting choice of words. Why would I bully a young girl?”

“Because I’m Lord Simeon’s fiancée, of course!”

His gray eyes glared at me. There was only one reason he could have to behave like this: he wanted to cause Lord Simeon pain. He had laid his hands upon me to torment Lord Simeon.

“Do you intend to continue your assault on Lord Simeon!?”

“Continue?” he asked.

“After all, you’re—”

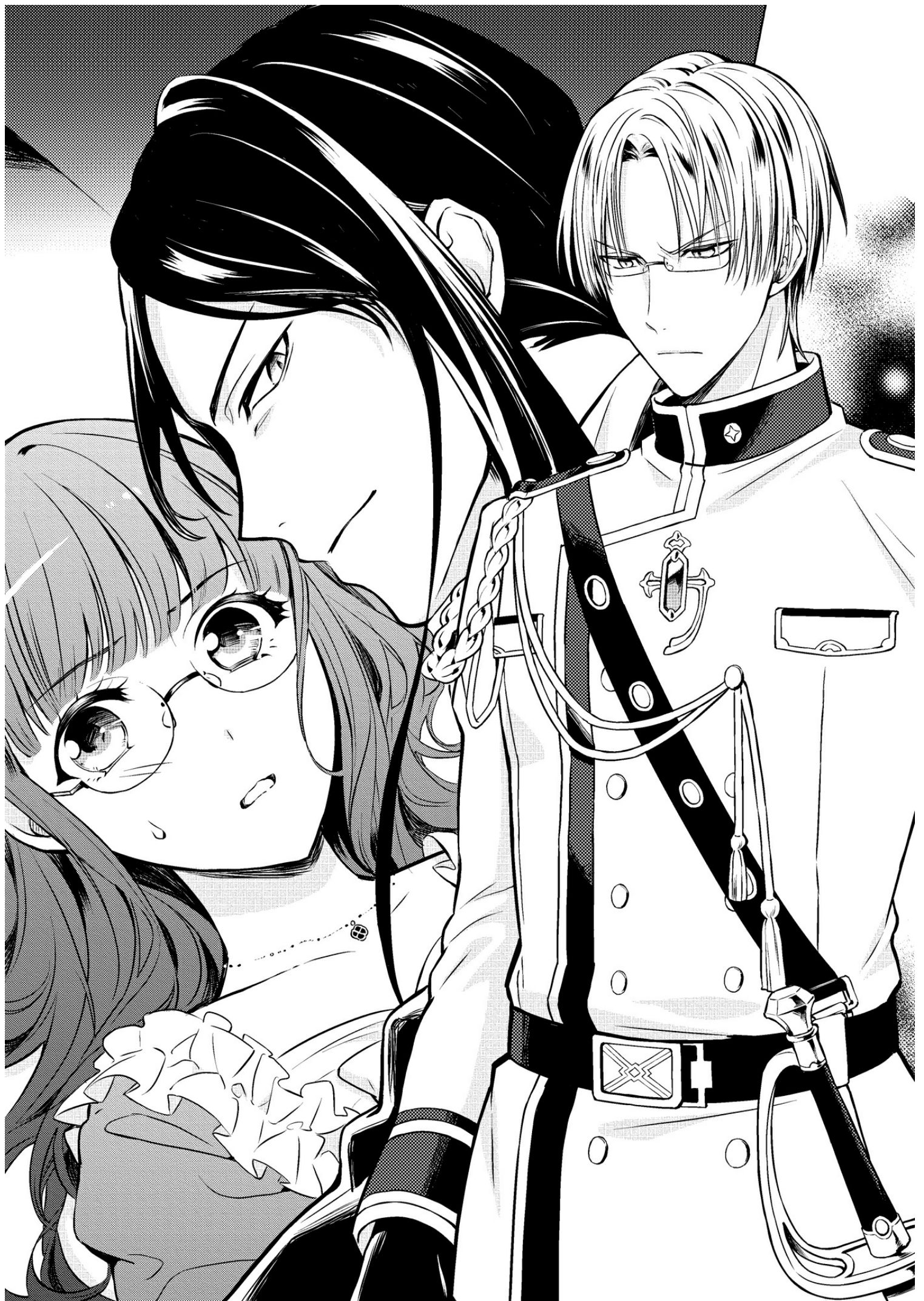
But the words I was about to cry out were interrupted as the door was violently flung open. I turned my head in shock and a figure in a white uniform

leapt into view.

Lord Simeon!

“Duke Silvestre,” he said in a deep voice, “kindly step away from my fiancée.” Both his tone and his gaze were as sharp as a knife. His aura of rage was so intense that it seemed as though he might draw his saber without any concern for his opponent’s immensely high status. “Even as a joke, it’s in somewhat poor taste. She’s not the type of person to enjoy such games. Please procure a different partner.”

“A joke?” said the duke with a manner that suggested he was neither amused nor especially angry. “Why, if you hadn’t interfered, I’d have absconded with her.”



He finally moved away from me slightly. With my freedom regained at last, I fought the urge to push him away and run straight to Lord Simeon. Instead, I maintained my composure and stayed in place, putting my disarrayed hair back into order as I waited for Lord Simeon to come to me. My whole body was still shaking.

Lord Simeon positioned himself between me and the duke. Those gray eyes disappeared, hidden from view by his broad shoulders. *That's the dependable man I know.* I felt a strong desire to cling on to him, but I pushed it firmly down and rooted my feet to the spot. *Not yet. I have to stay strong.*

As Lord Simeon and Duke Silvestre silently faced off, a beautiful silver-haired lady appeared in the doorway.

"Maurice?" She smiled sweetly, apparently not surprised at all by the bizarre scene she found her husband in. "What's happened here?"

"I was given the cold shoulder," the duke replied, showing no sign of guilt or shame.

"Oh," said the duchess quietly. She looked at me with a kind smile, as though she was seeing a daughter or a younger sister. "What a shame. I suppose you'll have to set your sights on another little bunny rabbit."

"Yes, it seems so."

Abruptly, the duke began to walk away, as though he'd now lost all interest in me. He put an arm around his wife and they left the room. Only the duchess turned to look back, smiling at us for a moment.

What on earth did I just experience? I had the feeling I had awoken from a nightmare. My whole body was covered in sweat.

Lord Simeon turned to face me. "Are you all right?"

When he reached his arms out, I simply couldn't hold back any longer. "Lord Simeon!" I cried out, embracing him, and he held me tightly in return. In the protection of his warm body and strong arms, my trembling began to subside. Feeling his broad chest returned me to my usual self. *As long as I'm here, everything is fine.* The reassurance drove away all my fear.

“Thank goodness I arrived in time,” said Lord Simeon with a sigh of relief.

He had raised a valid point. I looked up at him and asked, “What prompted you to come here at all?”

“I recalled that Duke Silvestre would be attending Her Majesty’s tea party today, and I suddenly had a bad feeling that something might happen. I hoped I was worrying over nothing, but that was sadly not the case.”

“You knew, Lord Simeon? You knew that the duke was the one pulling the strings in this entire case?”

Maurice Lunaire Silvestre. He was the “moon” Olga had warned me about.

Though I’d expected it to be some sort of metaphor, the answer was simpler than I had imagined. His middle name, “Lunaire”—it meant “lunar.” Olga hadn’t directly told me his name, but she had found the closest equivalent to doing so.

If only I had noticed sooner. His full name had even been clearly written on the invite list for my wedding. Only, a duke wouldn’t normally be referred to by his first name, let alone his middle name. I would only ever call him “Duke Silvestre” or “Your Grace,” so it hadn’t registered in my mind at all, and I had made no connection between him and the moon.

“So you realized it as well,” Lord Simeon replied.

“Only just now. I had finally pieced it together, and I was just at that very moment preparing to go and tell you.”

“I see,” he said, letting out another sigh as he held me. His expression turned bitter.

“How did you know, Lord Simeon?”

After a pause he said, “Because he looked at you.”

I blinked in confusion. “Looked at me?”

Lord Simeon gently caressed me with his hand. It seemed less meant to soothe me and more to confirm that I was there. “In the days when I was still watching you from a distance, I realized that the duke sometimes looked at you as well. It surprised me that I wasn’t the only one who had noticed your presence. It’s possible he saw that I was looking at someone, and he found you

by following my gaze.”

What? The duke had known about me for all that time?

“His eyes didn’t burn with passion when he looked at you, and you never noticed him doing it, so at the time it never gave me any great cause for concern. Nor does the duke have a reputation of being a terrible womanizer. I didn’t think he saw you as a target of such designs, so I simply let it be.”

He spoke haltingly, struggling to form these words. I nodded and smiled up at him. *Don’t worry. I thought the same.*

“I thought his occasional glances at you were no more than that. Even after we became engaged.”

“I can hardly blame you.”

When we attended Duke Silvestre’s ball shortly after Lord Simeon’s proposal, I had introduced myself to the duke while standing by my new fiancé’s side. It was the only time he and I had ever exchanged words in society, and he gave no sign of any particular interest in me. We had a short and purely formal conversation. That night I was on the receiving end of many different comments from many different people, but he neither ridiculed nor commended me for marrying into a more prestigious house. He acted like someone who did not care about me one way or the other.

“But as time went by, his behavior still persisted despite our engagement, and it gradually began to concern me. It was clear that he harbored some sort of interest in you.”

“And he tried to frame you because of that? I find that very implausible. I can’t imagine he was quite so attached to me.”

“I can’t say I fully comprehend it either. Rose was the one who told us Duke Silvestre might have been the masked man’s true identity. She said his way of speaking was rather similar, as were his mannerisms. However, her memories of the duke dated back to years earlier, and she had never been close to him. When we asked if she was certain, she didn’t seem very confident.”

When Lady Rose had been active in society, she and the duke had no doubt attended many of the same events. Even so, it would have been exceptionally

rare for a baron's daughter to speak directly to a duke, while to him, she was probably little more than one of the many people he saw standing in the distance.

"If Duke Silvestre was the one manipulating these events, neither I nor His Highness are able to discern any good reason. I certainly can't imagine why the duke would betray His Majesty. Leaking official secrets is also an unlikely crime for a man of his position. The reward for it would usually be money or status, but he hardly has any need of those."

"You're right," I replied, nodding at his entirely reasonable deduction. Duke Silvestre was the king's cousin—a position that afforded him special treatment in various ways. He had an immense fortune and the highest status he could possibly wish for. The only higher position would be the throne itself, and he had no claim to that. He also displayed no interest in any control over the realms of politics or the military.

The impression one got from him was difficult to sum up in words, but if forced to, I'd have described him as "pleasure-seeking." He disliked burdens of any sort, and lived exactly as he wished, enjoying whatever pursuits entertained him. That was the sort of person he was.

"And if he holds a grudge against me personally," Lord Simeon continued, "it's hard to imagine what the cause of it would be. There has never been that kind of discord between us. In the end, His Highness concluded that it was probably a case of mistaken identity, and the masked man had to be someone else. I concurred, but then I recalled his attention toward you. If the duke did have a grievance against me, you were the only reason I could think of."

I frowned. This was a succession of things I hadn't expected to hear, and I started to feel as though I might lose track.

"But even so," he continued, "it doesn't seem like a complete explanation. If he was so eager to have you for himself, he had plenty of time before our engagement. Why would he behave this way after all this time? I don't understand it at all." Lord Simeon slipped his hands under his glasses and rubbed his eyes. This was his habit when he wanted to calm himself and regain his composure.

While looking up at his pretty face, I mulled over the situation. I couldn't understand it either, and I couldn't accept it as the explanation. It was inconceivable that the duke would have such an interest in me.

I didn't think that was the reason. Even if I was the catalyst, his goal must have been something else.

"To stave off boredom," I muttered.

He raised his head. "What?"

"Perhaps the duke didn't have any particular desire to frame you, or to betray His Majesty. Or to have me, of course. Perhaps all he wanted was to set up a prank and watch everyone scurry about in response."

The duke always had a listless and bored-looking expression. I wasn't the only one that he showed no strong interest in; he seemed to feel that way about everyone. He also wasn't the sort of person whose thoughts could be easily grasped by looking at him.

I had heard more than a few rumors related to him. "He has a penchant for strange practical jokes. He toys with people and torments them. And yet, sometimes he also provides great assistance to people he has no connection to. The duke's so-called 'games' are said to have no reason behind them whatsoever. He can be either good or evil, depending entirely on his whims."

In the whispers that floated around society, he was described as being cruel in the way a child might be. He played with people as though they were toys, or perhaps as if he was picking flowers or catching insects. He would dote on you if it suited him, and then, with no particular joy or malice, he would suddenly tear off your wings.

Lord Simeon made a dubious expression. "Games?"

Yes, I suppose he's pretty much the duke's exact opposite. They would never understand each other.

And maybe that was exactly why the duke had wanted to toy with Lord Simeon. A serious young man, stubborn and set in his ways, had his eye on a particular young lady. He watched her for years, then finally proposed to her. Perhaps this intriguing turn of events had lit the fire of trickery in Duke

Silvestre's heart.

"Have you found any evidence of the duke's involvement?" I asked.

"Unfortunately not. It seems even Commander Kastner didn't know the identity of his co-conspirator."

"Then I suppose this case ends here, doesn't it?" I sighed. "Still, if it was indeed all part of the duke's practical joke, I doubt the situation will grow any more serious. The information leaked to Easdale was not even especially useful to them, based on what Lord Nigel said. If His Majesty gives him a stern warning, that might be enough to draw a line under the matter."

Lord Simeon nodded in resignation. "I suppose so. I shall discuss it with His Highness."

"It is vexing on a personal level, however!"

"It's far more than that. Game or otherwise, seeing him lay a hand on you... He's even more wicked than Lutin."

Seeing Lord Simeon's anger, I began to feel quite happy, an odd reaction though that might have been. *I've been through a terrifying experience, but I have Lord Simeon.* That truth fended off all my fear and uncertainty. *Even if you do come for me again, Duke Silvestre, I definitely won't let you beat me. Lord Simeon and I will turn the tables on you together!*

I reached out and stroked his cheek. His momentary surprise soon gave way to a soft smile. Then nature took its course and our lips slowly drew nearer.

"Sorry to keep you wa— Oh dear, am I interrupting?"

Princess Henriette stood in the open doorway. We froze at the moment just before our lips met.

"I'm terribly jealous. I wish I could have my fiancé so close. I do hope I can meet Prince Liberto soon."

She spoke with a hint of both teasing and grumbling. We awkwardly pulled away from one another.

Ugh, why do we always have such bad timing lately? I can hardly even remember when Lord Simeon and I last kissed!

“Interesting, though,” said Princess Henriette. “Even Simeon, the man born from stone, becomes a proper lover in the company of his bride-to-be.”

“Excuse me,” Lord Simeon protested, “but I’m born of a woman, just like everybody else.”

“Are you certain? The established theory is that your parents were a tree and a rock.”

So they, too, have an easy familiarity like the relationship between two siblings. Princess Henriette’s upbeat mood cheered me up as well, and we both laughed at the deep frown lines that appeared on Lord Simeon’s forehead.

Chapter Thirteen

When I was subsequently called in for questioning regarding the case, I asked if I could see Lord Francis, and was permitted a very brief meeting with him. Lord Simeon was not present. The only other person present was the military police officer on duty.

Lord Francis had looked exhausted when I had last seen him a few days earlier, but now he seemed somehow refreshed. He bowed his head deeply before me. “I truly apologize for causing you so much trouble.”

“But they threatened you and forced you to do their bidding. You didn’t really want to betray Lord Simeon...did you?”

I didn’t want to believe that the friendship between them had been completely lost. Lord Francis neither nodded nor shook his head. A bitter smile formed on his lips. “Betray him? I don’t think I’m such a special person to Simeon that a word like that would be warranted.”

“How could you think that?”

“It’s as I told you before. As glad as I am for him to call me his friend, our respective social statuses were very different, and we weren’t especially close. It was simply that he didn’t bully me, and he rescued me from the other children who did. Despite knowing about my heritage, he didn’t mock me, nor did he openly make a particular fuss over it. He treated me normally—that was all. And that alone made me so very happy.”

He spoke sadly, though with a hint of wistful nostalgia.

“Adrien always boasted about his brother, but Simeon was a shining beacon for me as well. I really liked him, but at the same time, I couldn’t help envying him. He was the heir to a storied and prestigious earldom. He was highly accomplished in both literary and military arts, and was blessed with dashing good looks. He was never mocked by anyone. He was the shining star, always standing center stage. The things I lacked so completely came so easily for him.

I was jealous and resentful.”

I watched him silently, and he continued.

“There was no place for my family in this country. Those of mixed parentage are forced to endure unpleasant remarks in Gandia as well, but the reception in Lagrange is far frostier. That was why I didn’t have many qualms about committing such a crime. I couldn’t muster any loyalty to a country that had never accepted me or my family. The land that matters to me is Gandia, where my mother and sister have been able to live in peace.”

“Even if it meant betraying Lord Simeon?”

When I brought up this point again, he cast his eyes down. “When the commander and his men told me to do it, at first it seemed unthinkable. Helping to frame Simeon? Besmirching the glowing reputation of the most upstanding man I know? On the one hand I thought it a disgusting scheme, completely repulsive...but on the other, I began to ask myself: wasn’t this what I had wanted all along? I felt as though my own ugly heart, which had been harboring this jealousy for years, had summoned these evildoers.”

Lord Francis’s shoulders were shaking. Between the strands of hair hanging down in front of his face, I could see teardrops spilling from his eyes.

“I knew that if my illegal business practices came to light and I lost my job, I wouldn’t be able to provide for my mother and sister. I might have been able to move to Lagrange and find work in the rougher parts of the city, or perhaps in the countryside, but I didn’t want to put my mother through that, and I didn’t even want to imagine what it might mean for my sister’s upcoming wedding. I convinced myself I had no choice but to go along with their threats. I tried my hardest to justify it. For Simeon, a false accusation wouldn’t have too great an impact, I told myself. His career progression would be hindered somewhat, perhaps. Even if he lost his job, he would still inherit the earldom and retain a perfectly satisfactory position in society. It wouldn’t ruin his life. Whatever happened, he wouldn’t die or even be injured, but merely suffer a blow to his reputation. I used all my pathetic excuses to paper over my ugly heart. And yet, the truth was that some part of me welcomed it. I was glad that he might have the chance to experience even a fraction of the humiliation that I had endured.”

His voice gave way to sobs.

“It’s all...my fault...”

When it comes to people we think are superior to us—more beautiful, more talented, more successful—we tend to admire them, yet feel a degree of jealousy at the same time. It was a perfectly normal reaction. If nothing had happened to set off this chain of events, Lord Francis would probably have left those feelings bottled up for his entire life. Certainly, it had been his own weakness that had let him give into temptation. Still, I wasn’t of a mind to criticize him for it. There was no need when he already blamed himself more strongly than anyone else could. What would be the use of adding to that?

I didn’t forgive him either, of course. That was not up to me, but to Lord Simeon. I did suspect, though, that Lord Simeon might have forgiven him already.

“Lord Francis,” I said, “I hope we can meet again someday when you’ve paid for your crime. When we do, I think you’ll finally understand that Lord Simeon really does consider you his friend.”

“What?” Lord Francis lifted up his head.

I smiled at him and puffed up my chest confidently. “You watched him from a young age, admiring him and being jealous of him, yet it seems you still don’t understand him at all. I know him better. Lord Simeon tends to be rather blunt. If he calls someone a friend, they really are his friend. He calls you that because he feels you’re precious to him. If he only thought of you as an acquaintance, he wouldn’t give you the moniker of ‘childhood friend.’”

He only stared at me, so I continued, “Though it is a rather pleasant feeling to know him better than his childhood friend! At least I don’t need to be jealous. Next time we meet, I hope you’ll become my friend as well. I’ll leave the third spot in the Lord Simeon Love and Support League open for you!”

Lord Francis’s dumbfounded stare gave way to a crumpled mess of laughter and tears. He nodded and said, “Yes!”

Lord Francis’s crime was not all that serious. He probably would lose his job, of course, but would not be separated from his family for years. That still left

the concern about how his mother and his younger sister would get by until his return, but I had the feeling it would be all right. There was a certain person who would never simply leave them in the lurch. Until his friend regained his freedom and returned home, I felt sure he would help them in Lord Francis's place.

The time I was allotted to see Lord Francis came to an end, and he was returned to his holding cell. I was escorted out to the corridor, where I saw Lord Simeon and Lady Rose standing.

"Were you eavesdropping?" I asked.

Lord Simeon, who had been pressing his ear right up against the wall, covered his mouth and turned away, his habit when he was blushing. *Well, I suppose there's no longer any need to worry that he's secretly in far lower spirits than he's letting on.*

I ignored him and turned to face Lady Rose. "Good day, Lady Rose!"

"Good to see you, Marielle."

Today, as ever, she wore tightly fitting men's clothing. I could not stop fangirling over this goddess who possessed both gallant masculinity and feminine allure. And, beyond even that, this beautiful woman was secretly a female spy. As a trope that set my fangirl bells ringing, this was second only to the black-hearted military officer. *What a shame that I can't base a story on her! I'm sure my readers would fangirl just as hard as me.*

She continued, "I was so hoping to run into you before returning home to Gandia. It's such a shame that we haven't had much opportunity to talk."

"What? You're leaving already?"

I was crestfallen. I had so many things to ask her now that I knew the truth! *Besides, isn't Lagrange her real home?*

Though perhaps, I considered on reflection, she no longer thinks of it that way.

"I'm primarily working down in Gandia at the moment. This case will have made it even more difficult for me to operate in Lagrange, in fact, since I don't

know to what extent Lord Nigel will keep my secret.”

“Oh! But...just to ask...I don’t suppose you’re thinking of giving it up at some point, are you? If you were... If you did have that sort of intention, I mean... I would provide every assistance! I know all kinds of secrets about the people in society, so I might be able to help you get your fortune back!”

I’d been pondering whether to say that or not, but there was no more time left, so I had no choice but to decide on the spot.

Lady Rose looked a little surprised for a moment, but soon resumed her kind smile. “Oh my. Despite appearances, you’re a rather formidable young lady. I’m highly intrigued to know what kinds of secrets you mean, but honestly, I don’t need my fortune back.”

“Then...I’m sorry for my discourtesy in suggesting it. If it were me, I would never be able to forgive them.”

Returning to Lagrange must have involved many painful reminders that her uncle and his family had stolen her home and her birthright, and were now living comfortably off of her fortune. I thought she might have wanted to take it back one day. “Female intelligence operative” had a nice ring to it, but “baroness” would have been a fine title as well, I felt.

“Of course, it’s not that I never think about it at all. However, for me, it’s all in the past. Even if I did get my title back from my uncle, I wouldn’t be able to turn back the clock. I can never go back to being who I once was. I don’t mean that in a negative sense, you understand. I’m quite fond of who I am now.”

She spoke with a cheerful air in which I sensed no false bravado. Her past had been painful, but it had led her to have all sorts of experiences that had made her who she was today. *Yes, I suppose it is better to feel proud of that rather than hold a grudge over it.*

“Then I apologize again for my impertinent remarks. I also wish I could have spoken to you more, however. Please get in touch if you ever have the chance.”

“Thank you. I was worried about Francis and Simeon, so I wanted to be here in person. That was why I came back to Lagrange. However, knowing that there’s someone like you here, I’m confident it will all be fine. I won’t be able to

attend your wedding, I'm afraid, but I wish you every happiness."

"Thank you so much!"

Lady Rose turned on her heel in a dashing manner. She began to walk, but then turned around as though she had just remembered something. "There was one more thing I meant to tell you. Simeon and I were never romantically involved, so don't worry."

"What? I..."

"That question was bothering you, wasn't it?"

I struggled to respond. *She saw right through me!* When I glanced at Lord Simeon, he was looking back at me. Our eyes met for an instant, then both of us looked away, flustered.

Lady Rose laughed, then said, "Imagine not even noticing that your own fiancée is fretting about something like that. Simeon, you really are too obtuse for words. Anyway, we were no more than friends...you might say. I don't know if it would be strictly accurate. His looks are second to none, so I didn't entirely keep my hands off him."

"What!?" I exclaimed.

"Rose!" said Lord Simeon reproachfully.

She continued, "But the response I got was far too serious and dull. He's not the sort of man who enjoys a purely playful love affair, so all I got back from him was a sense that he felt pressured. At the time I didn't appreciate the virtues of a man with true sincerity, so I saw more appeal in the playboys of society."

"Pressured, you say?"

"No, that's not what... Rose!" Lord Simeon blushed deeper than I'd ever seen before. *He can't deny it, can he?*

"But you still needn't worry," said Lady Rose. "He has you now. Seeing you together, it's clear that you're his entire world—to an almost obnoxious degree, frankly. And he's certainly not the sort of man skilled enough to be seeing multiple women at the same time."

“Rose, stop this!” he cried. “Please!”

“Perhaps you should stop flaunting your relationship in front of us single folk. Though I’ll have you know there are plenty of men trying to woo me. I’ve even received some rather passionate advances from the king of Shulk. I came back to Lagrange partly to run away from him.”

“Oh! Oh! Tell me every single detail!”

“No, Marielle!” said Lord Simeon. “You’re not supposed to know about that yet!”

“Now that I’ve seen inside an occupied room at a brothel, I’m no longer afraid of anything!”

“Forget what you saw!”

Lady Rose left us to our fevered exchange. A faint scent of civet lingered in the air, but quickly dissipated.

I wasn’t sure how to feel in the silence that was left. Should I be laughing or pouting? Still, it had been better to hear the truth from Lady Rose herself rather than letting my imagination run away with me and getting upset as a result. It was a relief.

In any case, it was all in the distant past. When I looked at Lord Simeon’s face, it was abundantly clear that I didn’t have to worry about any competition.

“Shall we go home?” he said at last.

After I pause I replied simply, “Yes, let’s.”

We went outside, where gentle rays of sunlight warmed the air, and the world felt more springlike with every passing day. Even the tiny birds chirping in the treetops sounded happy. Early-blooming tulips were lined up in delightful rows in the flowerbeds.

As we made our way to the carriage at a leisurely pace, I asked Lord Simeon, “What happened next with Duke Silvestre?”

He suddenly looked exhausted. “I gave a report to His Highness and Captain Poisson, who in turn reported it to His Majesty. His Majesty, it seemed, had already been faintly aware of the plot. It seems that in addition to being a

game —well, I suppose the game was the ‘additional’ part, but it’s hard not to think of it the other way around—this served as a way to purge the military branches.”

“What? A purge?”

“This case allowed us to clear out a great number of men engaged in corrupt behavior. Birds of a feather flock together, as they say —all those involved were themselves rather lacking in principles. Arresting them has allowed us to reopen investigations into older cases of corruption and crack down more widely. We were even able to confirm Easdale’s view of the situation, so one might say that things turned out for the best. Although, I’m not so certain that I believe that.”

“I certainly don’t! Why did any of this require you to be dragged into it!?”

“I suppose that aspect of it was the duke’s ‘game.’”

Lord Simeon and I looked at one another. Both of us sighed deeply at the same time.

Ugh, what an irritating person the duke is. If he was purely evil at least I could judge him definitively, but the fact that it was difficult to even define him as “evil” was harder to deal with. His Majesty, too, had behaved in a rather black-hearted manner. It seemed he had guessed the duke’s intentions, and then stayed silent, expecting that Lord Simeon would somehow manage to resolve it on his own—and if not, at least his son wouldn’t be implicated. *There is something impressive about that sort of scheme. A black-hearted king —how wonderful! Yet still irritating!*

It seemed the two cousins were more alike than I had realized. At this juncture I was glad that Prince Severin hadn’t inherited that vicious streak.

Consoling Lord Simeon, who was rather grumpy about the whole affair, I got into the carriage. Lord Simeon instructed the driver to head towards my home, but I quickly raised a request of my own.

“If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to go to your house,” I told Lord Simeon.

“Do you have something to take care of there?”

“Yes, related to the wedding preparations. Oh, and I must add Lord Nigel’s name to the invite list.”

“You’re inviting him?”

“Of course. He’ll be a regular fixture in our lives from now on, won’t he?”

“I have an awful feeling he might cause some further chaos.”

“I doubt he’d do anything to disrupt the happy occasion. Far more uncomfortable for me is having to invite Duke Silvestre.”

“I quite agree there.”

Lord Simeon gave the driver the new instructions and we soon arrived at the residence of House Flaubert. After I spoke to the butler and dealt with the business I had to attend to, I asked where Lord Simeon was.

He was in his study, which I’d heard was still a complete mess following the military police’s search, since the servants couldn’t rearrange things without Lord Simeon’s permission.

When I entered, he was looking at some documents. “Lord Simeon, let me help.”

“Are you finished with your business?”

“Yes. I must say, I thought you’d have a great deal of tidying to do, but it all looks surprisingly in order. I expected far worse.” The room, which I had been told was in a wretched state, had already been largely restored to its usual condition. It seemed there was no need for my help after all.

“I had the servants help me sort the books. All that remains is confirming whether any documents are missing, and that’s a task only I can take care of.”

“Hmm. Well then, shall I rub your shoulders perhaps?”

Lord Simeon laughed softly and put the papers on the desk. “Actually, there’s something I’d like to talk to you about. Will you sit down?”

He pointed to a couch by the wall. Apparently he often slept there, too busy to even spare the time to go back to his room. *Perhaps that’s a sign that he’s a little too much of a workaholic. When we’re married I might have to pester him*

about mending his ways.

Lord Simeon called a servant to bring tea. I sat down to drink mine, and he drank his while leaning against the window. The sky on the other side of the glass was gradually starting to turn red.

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked.

He had such a different air about him than usual that I was left perplexed. He appeared to be somewhat lost; it took him a moment to decide how to begin. At last he put his teacup on the desk and said, “During this incident, we spoke many times, but I don’t really feel we reached any conclusion.”

My heart skipped a beat.

Calmly he continued, “I’m sure you must have many things you wish to say to me as well.”

“Well, yes, but...”

After all the uncertainty between us lately, I wasn’t sure how to reply. Certainly, I also had some unresolved feelings that hadn’t been properly dealt with. *But is Lord Simeon raising this subject so we can make up? Or does he... No, it can’t be...*

Finally I said, “Please feel free to start, Lord Simeon.”

Right now, I was more eager to hear his thoughts than to express mine. After a moment’s silence, he nodded. “On this occasion, I caused you a great deal of shock with an unexpected incident that I told you nothing about. You must have been incredibly worried and unsure. I knew that this would happen, of course. I knew that it would upset you, but I still couldn’t tell you.”

“Yes,” I replied simply. After being told this so persistently, I no longer had any desire to object to it.

“Even once you did become aware of the circumstances, I still hid many of the details. Even now, there are all sorts of things I cannot tell you. My work involves a great deal of confidential information that I cannot talk about with anyone, even my immediate family or my fiancée.”

“Yes,” I said again.

“And I won’t apologize for that,” he said flatly.

“What?” Taken aback, I let out the exclamation without meaning to.

Lord Simeon stared at me with an unwavering gaze.

“I won’t apologize for the secrets, or the deception. I can’t. If I do, it will become a promise to improve my behavior. But I am unable to do that. In the future, I will probably continue to hide a great many things from you, and deceive you, as and when it is necessary. No matter what, I refuse to make a rash promise that it will never happen again.”

I simply stared at him.

“I won’t make a promise I can’t keep,” said Lord Simeon. “If I lie to you, making a promise that I intend to break as soon as I’ve made it, then what meaning does it have? It will only hurt you more. That’s why I’m telling you outright: I won’t apologize.”

His defiant words left me speechless. I had never expected to hear such a unilateral statement from Lord Simeon, who had always been so kind and considerate toward me.

But he had an entirely earnest look in his eyes. He wasn’t looking down on me, dismissive of the idea that a woman could ever understand. Instead, he was trying as hard as he could to convey his own feelings. It was a gaze that begged me to see his point of view, to *please* understand somehow.

“I’m aware, of course,” he added, “that saying something like this might make you lose your affection for me. I know that not apologizing in a situation where I ought to apologize hurts you as well. What a worthless man I am. Francis sees me as such a magnificent person, but in truth I’m nothing but a stubborn fool. I can’t even say a single word to make you happy.” He took a breath. “If you say you want to call off the wedding, I’ll understand.”

“You’re suggesting that at this stage? The ceremony is less than two months away!”

“I know. I really should have spoken to you about this sooner. It was cowardly of me to only bring it up now, when there’s so little time left. I should have mentioned it when we first got engaged, but honestly speaking...I forgot.”

“You forgot?”

“I was in such high spirits. I intended to have a happy marriage with you, with no problems at all. But thinking about it with a cooler head, there will be nothing *but* problems. I saw the despair in your eyes —the feeling that it wasn’t supposed to be that way. That was when I realized that I couldn’t in good conscience make you my wife. Not if you felt that way.”

He stopped a moment, hesitating before proceeding with his next words. I clutched at my chest.

“So, if you prefer, we can call off the engagement. I’ll take all of the responsibility and all of the blame.” Even having finally given voice to his thoughts, he gazed at me unwaveringly, never looking away, to a degree that was quite infuriating. His face was a picture of conviction. “I’ll make it known to all of society that the blame lies with me, and do my utmost to ensure you don’t lose any face whatsoever. I’ll pay compensation to House Clarac as well. You needn’t worry about a thing. So please, don’t feel any hesitation. Make the choice you wish to make.”

He held both his hands in trembling fists by his sides. Despite the composed look on his face, a brief glance downward made the emotions he wanted to hide painfully evident. *Does he not even realize that?* I sighed and stood up.

I walked forward and stopped right in front of him, then stared directly into his eyes.

I took a deep breath.

“You...are *too damned serious!*”

As I yelled at the top of my lungs, shock appeared in his light blue eyes.

“That’s right, too damned serious, that’s what you are. You’re a rigid, stuffy, stubborn, obstinate fool! Are you sure a stone didn’t give birth to you!? I might go and ask Countess Estelle just to be sure!”

In reaction to my furious verbal assault, Lord Simeon’s eyes became saucers.

Honestly! He really, truly, honestly is being far, far, far too serious! Why was he thinking so hard about this!? The world was chock full of people arguing

about the same thing over and over, promising that they would never do it again, then casually doing it again anyway. It was the most ordinary thing in the world! My own father had repeatedly forgotten my mother's birthday, always buying her an expensive present to win back her favor. My mother, meanwhile, was always babbling on and on and on, inevitably putting her foot in it by saying the wrong thing. And my brother still tracked mud all through the house after his gardening endeavors, no matter how many times he was reminded. *Even our neighbor's dog keeps sneaking back into our front garden, undeterred no matter how many times he's attacked and chased away by our cat.*

And me, too. Yes, I'm the worst perpetrator of all! And at present, my number one victim was Lord Simeon, of course. I couldn't even count the number of times he had lectured and rebuked me.

But even if we cry and argue and grow angry with one another, as long as we care about each other, we can make up. That's what family is.

So I didn't mind if he'd have to apologize repeatedly. Even knowing the same thing would keep happening, he could give a new and profuse apology every time for all I cared! *I'm sure I'll rage and lament every time, but I'll forgive you every time as well. And what on earth is wrong with that? Why do we have to go to the extreme of canceling the engagement!?*

Life is not about perfection!

"Do you know what would be a far bigger problem for me than losing face in society? Do you know what would make me so sad I would rather die? Losing you! Can't you worry about that instead!?"

"But, well... After we get married, your sadness would be for life."

"Are you so eager to cancel the engagement? Are you no longer interested in me? You're at the end of your tether because I don't listen to a word you say, and just act impulsively on my own—is that what you're telling me? Because lately, you seem to have no interest in chiding me anymore. It's because you want to abandon me, isn't it!?"

"No!" he cried loudly, his expression transforming. "That's not true! My recent behavior is because I felt I was in no position to blame you. You acted as a result of my deception, which unfairly threw you into turmoil. I know that you

would never leave someone to suffer if they were in danger—that even if I tried to stop you, you would make an effort to save me. So if I wanted to stop you, the only option was for me to do the saving first. I wouldn't abandon you because of something like that. I just... I just don't want to make you unhappy!"

"Then please, don't let me go!" I leapt forward with enough force to knock him back and threw my arms around him, clinging as tightly as I could though his back was so broad that my hands didn't meet. "Stop talking nonsense and just hold me! Why do you have to take this to such absurd lengths? It's fine to simply apologize! I don't mind if the same thing happens again later. You can apologize for this instance, and we can make up. What's wrong with that?"

"I can't behave in such an insincere fashion."

"Then what am I supposed to do!? All I do is make you worry and get scolded by you over and over."

"Well...admittedly, I would like it if you didn't involve yourself in danger so often."

"It's not as though I *like* danger. It's just that sometimes I'm left with no other choice. If I knew the situation was so dire that nothing I did could possibly help, I would give up. But if there's a chance, however small, I will always want to do something. No matter how many times you tell me not to, and I apologize, I will definitely do it again. Do you see that as insincere on my part?"

"No," said Lord Simeon, shaking his head. "But that's not the same."

Despite my earnest pleading, he didn't yield at all. *Perhaps his head isn't made of rock, but of steel! How did he end up so unlike his parents? I agree with Princess Henriette, his real parents must have been a tree and a rock!*

"I love you," he said. "From the bottom of my heart, I love you. You are irreplaceably precious to me, and I want to protect you from all harm. For me to hurt you of my own accord is something that simply shouldn't be. So I can't make a promise I know I won't keep."

"What a thing to say directly after hurting me!"

I beat my fist against his chest. How was I going to break through this solid rock and steel!? If pushing him didn't work, then maybe pulling away slightly?

But if I pull away, it sounds as though he'll let me go! Well, perhaps less stick and more carrot? Not being angry with him, but appealing to his emotions? Tempting him so sweetly, so sensuously that he can't fight against it? But...no, I can't do that!

"The only other option is using tears to get my way," I said to myself. I hung my head, crestfallen, and let out a loud sigh.

Why was it so difficult to reach common ground? Lord Simeon was thinking single-mindedly about my happiness. I loved Lord Simeon as well, and wanted nothing more than to make him happy. Our feelings were exactly the same, so why were we facing in different directions?

"I understand," I said at last. "I won't ask you to apologize in the future."

I decided the only option was to change my way of thinking. Having come to that realization, I lifted my head. *Yes, it's no use simply asking Lord Simeon to apologize. Wanting an apology from him is my wish. Forcing him to do something he says he can't is just me being as obstinate as he is.*

Rather than pulling away, I could draw him in to me.

"I've understood your reason for not wanting to apologize, so I won't ever ask you to do it again."

"But then I'm forcing you to be unhappy."

"Yes, which is why..." I took one step back from him. "I want you to apologize for our entire lives in advance, right now."

"Excuse me?"

I put my hands on my hips and puffed up my chest. "I'm asking you to pay in advance. Then I'll no longer ask you for any further apologies."

"Pay in advance? That's... I don't think..." Lord Simeon put a hand on his forehead and thought silently for a moment, fighting to collect his disarrayed thoughts. "It doesn't work that way!"

"It's quite all right! Just apologize for the many times you'll deceive me and hide things from me all in one go. Then I'll forgive you all in one go. It will be resolved in an instant, and we'll both be so relieved."

“Relieved?” He cocked his head, visibly struggling to understand.

He was thinking so hard that he was tripping over his thoughts, when in fact the matter at hand was incredibly straightforward.

We loved each other. We were precious to each other. That was all.

“It seems you’re unaware of this, Lord Simeon, but one hears all sorts of things by keeping their eyes and ears open in society, and one thing I’ve learned is that there are no wives who don’t complain about their husbands or husbands who don’t complain about their wives. When it comes to marriage, everyone has gripes. Some are larger and some are smaller, but there is no such thing as a household entirely free of them. That is the reality of the world. Even so, people are greatly skilled at coping with them. They may have gripes, but they love their spouses enough to make up for that. They accept their husbands and wives as they are, including their grievances.”

“Including their grievances,” he said, almost to himself.

“If you tell me that you won’t allow for any problems whatsoever in our marriage, that leaves me in quite a predicament, because I am far from perfect. I’ll never stop my fangirling ways, and I intend to continue writing my novels. I frequently cause you a great deal of trouble. And yet you still forgive me, and love me, in spite of all that—don’t you? So why are you laboring under the impression that I won’t forgive you as well? Haven’t you noticed the contradiction? Putting aside this specific incident, I’ve had some gripes about you all along. You’re too serious and inflexible. You’re a workaholic, so busy with your job that we hardly have any time together. Goodness, if there’s anything I could call a gripe, it’s surely that! The wedding preparations have largely been handled by Countess Estelle and myself alone. I was hoping you could help me choose my wedding dress, but no such luck.”

He stared back at me, still trying to make sense of it all.

“That’s the Lord Simeon I fell in love with. I accept it all, because it’s who you are. And if you have to deceive me again in the future, I’ll accept that as well. So why don’t we draw a line in the sand, so we’ll be free from that pressure? I’m asking you to please not let me go. If you broke off our engagement, Lord Simeon, it would go beyond the level of a mere gripe. I’d receive such a heavy

blow that I'd never be able to write another book, and I would never recover. I'd lose all power of imagination and live out my days in a blur of sadness and tears."

As I put all of my emotions into this entreaty, a strange expression came over Lord Simeon's face. "You do realize that if you say such things, you're letting a serious conversation take a sudden turn into very eccentric territory."

"I am being entirely serious! And for me, losing my fevered imagination would be akin to not being able to eat anymore!"

"Well, I don't doubt that." He sounded exhausted, but finally let out a chuckle. "But are you sure you're happy with this? You'll be forced to endure rather a lot."

"I could say the same thing to you. If you forgive me, Lord Simeon, then I'll forgive you."

He stared at me for a moment, then said, "Understood."

Then my gallant knight knelt down, softly lifted up the hem of my dress, and placed a kiss upon it. "I apologize. I will never be able to prioritize you alone. I will probably have to keep many secrets from you, and engage in many deceptions, for the sake of my work, my master, and my country. Even while claiming I don't wish to hurt you, I will betray you by my very nature. It may be impossible for me to be a good husband. I apologize, truly and deeply, for being unable to pledge my loyalty to you alone." With his head tilted down, his blond hair hanging over his face, he said, "If you can forgive such a worthless man, and accept him, then please, Marielle, stay by my side for our entire lives."

"I forgive you." I bent down and embraced him. "You obstinate, serious, wonderful person. I love your awkwardness. I'll teach you that life can be more fun. I forgive all of your betrayals. And in exchange..."

Lord Simeon's arms had been about to surround me, but with my last words, they stopped suddenly, and his ears pricked up. I proceeded to tell him something of vital importance.

"If anything happens to you, I will leap into action again. I won't sit quietly and wait to be told that the circumstances aren't what I thought they were. I

won't smile and say it's fine to leave you to your own devices, like Countess Estelle. I know that you're a formidable person, but if there's a chance that the worst might happen, I will find something I can do on my part. Please resign yourself to that."

"You're stating it so outright?" he said after a pause.

"If I don't say it now, when will I ever say it? This is the time to lay our cards on the table. It's the time to accept each other as we are, so the subject has been properly brought up and dealt with. Wouldn't you agree?"

"You drive a hard bargain, Marielle." Lord Simeon sighed as he spoke, but he was not annoyed. He stood, smiling kindly, then put his hands around my waist and lifted me up. He sat down on the desk and placed me in his lap.

"It seems we're each as bad as the other," said Lord Simeon. "Perhaps we're more similar than we realize."

"Our personalities are diametrically opposed, but we're both very rigid in sticking to our own principles!"

We chuckled to one another. Lord Simeon put his arms around me and placed his cheek against my hair. I leaned into his shoulder and enjoyed the warmth I hadn't felt in so long.

As long as I had that warmth, any mere gripes would melt away. *Lord Simeon can seduce me in any number of ways, but he never even realizes he has that power. No matter how annoyed I get, or even if I cry, I'll forgive him if he simply holds me. He appeals to my inner fangirl so strongly, day in, day out, so how does he still not know that?*

But that only made me fangirl over him even more. This was the Demon Vice Captain, a fearsome man who would never let evildoers get the best of him. He would turn any trap or secret plot against its perpetrators; if anyone tried to harm him, they would find themselves the victims. And yet, even though he was the embodiment of everything that set my fangirl heart racing, he had no awareness of his own appeal. He was a wicked man who tempted me without even knowing it. *That aspect of him is so very sweet. I adore it.*

Being able to touch Lord Simeon again after so long was a pleasure. His lips

lightly tickled my temples and the point below my ears. The cold sensation when his glasses touched me tickled me as well. I laughed and pulled away slightly, and he grabbed hold of me and let me feel his breath even more closely.

“You’ve started to wear perfume lately,” said Lord Simeon.

“It was a gift from Countess Estelle.” I hesitated. This was the first time he’d mentioned it, and I didn’t sense a particularly favorable reaction. “Does it...bother you?”

I’d been careful to only use the very tiniest amount I could so that the smell wasn’t overpowering, but perhaps it was still off-putting to Lord Simeon, who didn’t use fragrances himself.

“I don’t mind an amount like this. Only, it’s too soon for you to use this scent.”

“Too soon?”

“Something more fresh and bright would suit you more, I think. Perhaps a citrus scent of some variety?”

I paused and then glared at him, pouting. “Am I really that childlike?”

A grown-up scent doesn’t suit me? Countess Estelle’s special aphrodisiac, satisfaction guaranteed, is a mismatch for me?

He looked away with an awkward expression. “That’s not quite what I meant. I’m more suggesting that...perhaps it would be better for you to be more childlike.”

“But—!”

“A scent like that works on other men, too, you know. Besides, after getting this far... After...staying strong... I don’t want you to make me weak.”

Wait. Did he just...?

Though the last words had been whispered so quietly that they were almost inaudible, I did not let them escape my notice. I peered up at his face. He was holding his hand over his mouth.

Does this mean... Could it be... The aphrodisiac is working!?

Goodness gracious! Trust his mother to know what was what! This scent was effective even against this obstinate blockhead, just as she had said!

I smiled with self-satisfaction and put hands around Lord Simeon's face. "Why don't I stay the night?"

"Don't say something so ridiculous! It's thoroughly improper!"

"We have less than two months left. What would be so wrong with it? Your family would have no objections. In fact, I have a feeling they'd be entirely in favor of it."

He paused a moment. "You're not wrong there, I'm sure. I know they'll start to bring up the topic of grandchildren soon, after all. B-but..."

"And it will ensure you don't start having any silly ideas about breaking off the engagement again, since we'll be bound in a way that gives us no choice but to marry."

"What sort of thing to say is that!"

"Don't worry. I do have a certain level of knowledge about it. I know far more than the average young noblewoman. And the parts I didn't know before, I had the chance to observe up close the other day!"

"I told you to forget about that!"

Lord Simeon tried to push me aside. I fought against this and clung onto him, laughing.

"You truly don't want to?"

"I do not! There's a line I mustn't cross! Laying hands on you before we take our vows would be an affront to your family as well!"

"You are too damned serious!"

"Stop using vulgar language."

This playful back and forth made me so happy, I couldn't stop laughing. I was relishing the return to my cozy everyday life.

There would be difficult times in the future as well. I would often be annoyed

and worried as I waited for Lord Simeon to come home. Sometimes I would probably tire of waiting and go out to meet him myself. I expected to repeat this pattern over and over, without it ever changing.

I acknowledge that our life won't always be easy. Still, there is a greater happiness. The path I walk with Lord Simeon, whatever joys and hardships it may bring, has a light that protects it.

The light of the feeling we have for one another. A light called love.

I finally held back my laughter, and Lord Simeon regained his composure as well. He brought his face closer to mine, and I stretched closer to him as well, ready to meet him.

But first, our glasses collided with a *clink*. Lord Simeon moved back slightly and removed his glasses, in that same slightly awkward moment, somehow unaffected and indefinable, that we experienced every time. He took mine off as well, and placed both pairs on the table before pulling me toward him again.

Now, at last, I would be able to indulge in that sweet thrill I had been missing for so long. I closed my eyes—

A cheerful puppy came bounding into the room. “Simeon! Enough tidying for today! Dinner will be ready soon! We’re having crab tonight! Crab!”

Lord Simeon froze and fell silent. His shoulders began to quiver.

“We’ll have so much to talk about now that we’re back home!” He paused. “Oh, Miss Four-Eyes is here too? Hmph. Well, there’s enough food for you as well. You can stay for dinner if you must.”

His tone instantly became standoffish when he noticed me, without him even realizing it himself.

“No matter how I think about it,” he said, “you’re an ugly cow and a complete mismatch for my brother. But...I do acknowledge your strength of will. You made every effort for my brother’s sake, and I can’t help appreciating that. You’re a strange woman and I don’t always understand you, but...you’re not such a bad person. Yes! I’ll allow it!”

Silently, Lord Simeon looked down at me, then moved me off his lap and

stood up. Despite how briskly he walked over to Lord Adrien, the latter still did not see what was coming.

Obliviously, Lord Adrien continued, “After all, you are able to cheat using makeup! When you have your fraudulent face on, you can stand beside my brother and not look too out of place, so you can still keep up appearances for House Flaubert. All you need to do then is feign politeness to ensure the outside world doesn’t become aware of your strange personality, and then I’d accept you as my sister-in-ARGH!”

A merciless clenched fist collided with his head. Lord Simeon grabbed the front of his collar and dragged him to the door in long strides.

“Ow, my head! Simeon, why? What are you...”

Then, as though he was nonchalantly tossing out some garbage, he threw Lord Adrien out into the corridor. He slammed the door and locked it.

“Simeoooooon!” howled Lord Adrien, pounding against the door. “Why!? What did I do!? Simeoooooon!”

But Lord Simeon coldly turned his back and returned his attention to me. I faintly heard Lord Noel’s voice saying, “I told you it was a bad time.”

I suppose I also have to accept that there will be interruptions, don’t I? I must prepare myself for not always having the chance to be alone with him. Still, a bustling home can be good fun!

“Apparently it’s time for dinner,” I said, lamenting it but somehow laughing as well. I soothed Lord Simeon and reached out for my glasses.

Lord Simeon interrupted me by picking me up and throwing me down onto the couch. I fell on my backside, and Lord Simeon leaned over me, pinning me down onto the cushions.

“Alas, my mouth is already preoccupied.”

Giving me no chance to object, he stole my lips and dragged me into his sweet passion. He kissed me again and again, and I embraced him back, entranced, happy to receive every kiss. I couldn’t see, hear or feel anything else now. Only our passion for one another.

We live to taste these moments of supreme bliss. We surrender our bodies to the joy of completing each other, then turn it into the strength to face another day. We repeat this one day after the next. We repeat it for a lifetime.

The days I spend with you, repeating that pattern, are my irreplaceable source of joy. Don't even think of letting go of me. If you do, I'll still cling to you anyway.

You are my love. My precious stubborn fool.

A spring day was gently coming to an end. Atop the desk, the light of the sunset glinted off both pairs of glasses.



The Sorrows of Prince Severin

I found it revolting, quite frankly. The man before me, whose nuptials were forthcoming rather imminently, was sighing with a look of exhaustion, but I was so certain it was related to Marielle that I couldn't work up any enthusiasm to care.

"What is it now, Simeon? All this brouhaha about you being framed has been wrapped up, so what have you got to be bothered about? Did you have an argument with Marielle or some such? Or is it the opposite—you're all worn out because you're getting along *too* well? Happy little bastard."

My words, spoken as I tucked into vegetables and fried white fish stuffed between two slices of bread, might perhaps have held a hint of my own problems. My sandwich was accompanied by soup in a large mug, and would be followed by a cup of tea. It was the sort of modest lunch a commoner might have. However, it's not that I was being treated inhospitably, or that the palace's financial affairs were in a tough spot. Rather, it was a meal I could eat rapidly enough for the brief window of time I had available. Being crown prince isn't all fun and games, as is popularly imagined. The meetings and inspections never cease, and whenever any dignitaries arrive from abroad, I'm forced to socialize with them. And of course, in any gaps left over, I had endless piles of paperwork to deal with. *I suspect commoners are living on easy street compared to me. At least they have one day of rest per week.*

As a consequence, my romantic ambitions were not exactly going according to plan. I had too few opportunities to meet young ladies who interested me and too little time to spend with them, so I never got anywhere. *If you expect me to get married, then at least allow me the time to woo a suitable bride, I beg you!*

Simeon, who was digging into a luncheon identical to mine, nodded in response. "You're not far off. Marielle has started trying to...tempt me. It seems my mother has been fanning the flames of this, and now Marielle is brazenly

making comments such as, ‘Since we cannot meet during the day, I’d like to spend the night with you.’”

“I knew it! You were secretly happy after all! How dare you complain about such a thing when I’m so unbearably swamped with work! Who says you and she must remain chaste until marriage anyway? Who cares, quite frankly!?”

I wanted to praise myself for not throwing my half-eaten bread at him. For a brief moment I really did have an urge to kill the rotten cur.

Simeon looked at my outraged glare with a mystified expression, then quickly shook his head. “No, you see, my exhaustion stems from more than just that. I spurn Marielle’s advances every time, but it’s proving more and more difficult. My mother, my youngest brother, and lately even the servants are egging her on. I fear if I let my guard down we’ll soon be locked inside my bedroom together, so it’s reached a point whereby for the past few days, I haven’t gone home and have slept in the official residence instead.”

Now that he mentioned it, he indeed hadn’t gone home now for three days in a row. Upon remembering this, the tension drained from my hands. I realized I had been about to screw up my bread into a tiny ball, which would have been a terrible waste.

“Well I never. And there I was thinking you were a happy little bastard getting your jollies every single night.”

I crammed the remainder of the sandwich into my mouth and washed it down with the soup. The crown prince’s gourmet meal was finished. *What’s next on the agenda? Some audience or other?* I wondered if I could justify being late for it. I’d have liked to at least enjoy one cup of tea without rushing about like a headless chicken.

My momentary sympathy for Simeon gave way when I really thought about what he had said. Wasn’t he still simply talking fondly of his darling lover? I felt my hackles rising again. “When it comes down to it, you are in fact rather happy though, are you not? Your ‘problem’ strikes me as one that the less romantically successful among us would be jealous of. What on earth is the need for you to reject her advances so vehemently? If she herself and all those around you are on board with it, then why not just accept it and be grateful? You’ll be married

soon enough anyway, so what ill effects could there possibly be?”

Simeon finished eating and put his mug down with a sigh. “If you’re asking that in all seriousness, then... Even I’m not quite as obstinate on this matter as it might seem. If things were to naturally take that course, I wouldn’t fight against it. But that’s quite different from this situation. Marielle doesn’t fully understand what she’s suggesting. She proudly boasts that she knows all about it, but there is definitely some sort of misunderstanding at play. And when I know that she only *thinks* she knows, I can’t bring myself to make such a move.” He spoke with a rather conflicted expression.

I cocked my head. “I could understand thinking that of a normal young lady, but this is Marielle, is it not? I imagine she’s gleaned all sorts of relevant information.”

“Viscount and Viscountess Clarac aren’t the type to tell her about that sort of thing. Like most parents, they probably raised her in a manner that kept all such information far from her reach.”

“But she might have learned about it elsewhere.”

“If she did know, she wouldn’t be so casual and unabashed in her efforts to tempt me. Her recent attacks have held no awareness that it might involve any more than a man and woman embracing one another in the same bed. It’s precisely *because* she doesn’t know better that she can say something so bold with so little concern.”

“Hmm.” I folded my arms and thought. *I’ll grant that it might be just as Simeon says.* Women who knew about carnal matters in detail had a certain air about them. If I had to look at Marielle and determine whether she had that sort of bewitching luster about her, then, certainly, she did not. Not in the slightest.

She was, instead, rather childlike. She was a girl who enjoyed yelling about her fangirl nonsense at the top of her voice. I sensed no amorousness from her at all.

“Even in the best of circumstances,” Simeon continued, “our age difference makes me feel as though laying a hand on her would make me no better than a scoundrel. I certainly couldn’t endure staining my hands with such a crime

before we're officially acknowledged as husband and wife."

"Hmm, yes. Quite a pickle you're in."

Simeon was so dejected that I began to feel a tad sorry for him after all. Despite how fortunate he looked from the outside, it seemed to be a rather thorny problem for him inside his own head, at least.

The man's earnest sincerity was his greatest virtue, but it came with the downside of a distinct lack of flexibility. Halfway sympathetic and halfway amused, I attempted to reassure him. "Look on the bright side. You only have to endure for a little over a month. Once the ceremony has been and gone, you can throw all your scruples out the window."

"Certainly, but it's looking to be a rather long month. Marielle is so lovely, and when she draws near to me so innocently, it's...a struggle."

"Y-yes...?"

"Her warmth and softness is so intense, and holds such power. I didn't know that when a woman I'm so fond of is before me, my sense of reason would be shaken to such a degree. When I embrace her, she feels so small in my arms. Marielle is self-conscious about her slender silhouette, but it actually makes me love her even more. Even while thinking that I must protect her, the impulse to give in and gorge myself rises higher and higher."

I screwed up my face.

"When she stands on tiptoes, wearing an alluring fragrance, she's so sweet and innocent. She seems to be going to great lengths to arouse my interest, and I'm sure she sees it as careful and calculated, but in fact it only emphasizes her immaturity. Still, even that makes her so lovely to me that I can hardly stand it. And her face when she looks up at me, that face appealing to me with the full force of her affection, is simply devastating. As we gaze into each other's eyes, I feel terrified that I'll push her to the ground then and there!"

"Yes, well, we had better hurry! We'll be late for our next appointment." I stood up rather than listening any further. What a fool I was for even asking. I turned my back on his so-called distress and gave it no further consideration. *Worry yourself into an early grave for all care, you happy little bastard!*

I left Simeon to catch up and headed toward the audience chamber. *Dammit, why must he be so chipper while I'm slowly being crushed to death by mountains of official business? It's so frightfully unfair! I'm a prince, aren't I!? Shouldn't I be leading more of a charmed life!?*

I stomped down the corridor angrily, but then paused outside the audience chamber and took a breath to compose myself. I couldn't show an angry face to a guest of the palace. Even if I felt thoroughly dismal on the inside, I still had to fix a perfect smile to my face. Only then did I give the signal to the chamberlain, who opened the door.

"Terribly sorry about the wait," I said, stepping into the room. The guest waiting for me had quite the look of shock upon seeing me. I froze, equally surprised. The smile I'd worked so hard to plaster onto my face disappeared in a flash.

Before me stood a lone girl still in her teenage years. "Your... Your Highness!?"

She leapt up from her chair in a manner resembling a bunny rabbit, or perhaps a baby squirrel. Her abundant black curls shook in the air.

"Miss Julianne? What are you doing here?"

"Marielle brought me. Then she said she had some business to take care of, and asked me to wait here."

As I wondered if there had been some sort of room mix-up, I let my gaze wander—and that was when I saw a certain young lady peeking in from behind the door. One of my younger sisters was there too. Their eyes sparkled with mischievous glee. Behind them stood Simeon, studiously avoiding my gaze with a look of great discomfort.

It all becomes clear.

"I'm awfully sorry!" said Miss Julianne. "I must be in the wrong place. I'll leave right away."

Still none the wiser, Miss Julianne started to leave in a panic. I stopped her and smiled. "Actually, I came here to take a breather, so you needn't feel you're bothering me. In fact, if you don't mind, how about we both have a cup of tea?"

My chance had arrived at last, and I was not about to let it slip away. Though Miss Julianne was still shrinking back in fear, I did my best to reassure her. *It seems heaven has been watching me toil, day after day, and at last I am rewarded. Praise be to God! And, well, praise be to Marielle too, I suppose.*

With this unexpected opportunity to spend time with the young lady I'd been so ardent in my fondness for lately, I felt like this day might not be such a waste of time after all. I might finally be able to get closer to her. My endless days of hard work were finally being repaid.

"I can't believe you read that book, Your Highness! You must really see yourself in it. How marvelous!" she said while we were drinking our tea.

I was glad Marielle had told me all about Miss Julianne's taste in literature. I was certain we'd develop an affinity for one another if we shared our respective impressions of a book. *Ah, the joy of liking a young lady and being liked back... And her eyes, they're somehow shimmering! I see what Simeon was getting at now. She's too lovely for words. It's a feeling so complicated I could never hope to describe it.*

"The scene where the master and servant pledged themselves to one another was so moving, I cried! Ah, a master and servant relationship is so special... Sacred, even..."

Her hazy eyes were no longer reflecting the real world. I was quite certain she had merged my visage with that of the master in the story.

Which was all well and good, but I wondered if Julianne was listening to a word I said. *It's you I'm interested in—you must realize that! The story wasn't bad, but male-male romance is not something I personally relate to! I don't have that particular predilection!*

But I had no sense that any of my feelings had reached her. It seemed the road to happiness would be a long one yet...

Afterword

It's the third book. What a spectacular accomplishment. It's me, Haruka Momo. Hello there.

I'm so grateful to be able to put out a third book in the Marielle Clarac series. I'm immensely indebted to my editor as always, and Maro drew wonderful illustrations for me once again. There are also many other people whose efforts played a part in producing this book—and, above all, it wouldn't have been possible to continue the series without your support, dear readers. Thank you so much to each and every one of you.

Spring has finally arrived in the story. It's the season they've been waiting for, with their wedding ceremony just around the corner. Marielle and Simeon are full of joy and excitement, but they do say it's always darkest before the dawn, and it won't be a straight line towards their goal. There's even the risk of a last-minute cancellation.

This tale has always had humor at the heart of it, but this time it takes a more serious turn. As the number of characters has increased, the amount of sweetness has decreased proportionately. I was worried about whether readers would accept it, but I decided to set my sights on writing a substantial story that was really worth reading. I figured that readers who have been there since the first book have probably built up some resistance, so I increased the amount of focus on the case. But I knew if I got too into that I'd end up abandoning the romance aspect entirely and writing a story full of bitterness, so I told myself: This is a love story! The main theme of it is love! With occasional laughs!

So I hope you still enjoy all the ups and downs, and lovers' quarrels, of this pair of soppy lovebirds.

That one particular guy who debuted in this book is actually related to a separate story that I serialized on the website *Shousetsuka ni Narou*. When I started to write Marielle Clarac, I set it in the same world as that story, and I thought it would be interesting for the two characters to meet at some point.

However, as I kept going, I realized they were set in completely different time periods. In the end, rather than having them meet directly, I introduced a descendant of my other character instead. This is just additional background information—you can read Marielle Clarac on its own with no problems. However, anyone familiar with that story might be able to enjoy this one in a slightly different way with all the backstory in mind. Maro took on board all my obsessive pickiness and drew him very attractively, so the illustrations made me go, “Yes, that’s right!” Anyone else who understands that, please fangirl just as hard as I am.

I started writing this series based on an idea that just popped into my head, and I write each book with the intention that it would be fine to end the series there. However, having gotten this far, I really want to make them get married. Simeon kept on saying “Wait!” this time, so I want to get to him saying “Let’s go!” as quickly as possible.

My wish is for them to safely reach the day when weddings bells are ringing.

—Haruka Momo

March 2018





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The Temptation of Marielle Clarac by Haruka Momo

Translated by Philip Reuben Edited by Linda Lombardi

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2020